EDGE

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What does it take to build one of the biggest games of its generation? Starting on p66, we take an all-access tour of Ubisoft Montreal to discover how far it's willing to go to push its series to new heights

PINNACLE

ASSASSIN'S CREED III

INSIDE THE MOST AMBITIOUS PROJECT IN UBISOFT HISTORY

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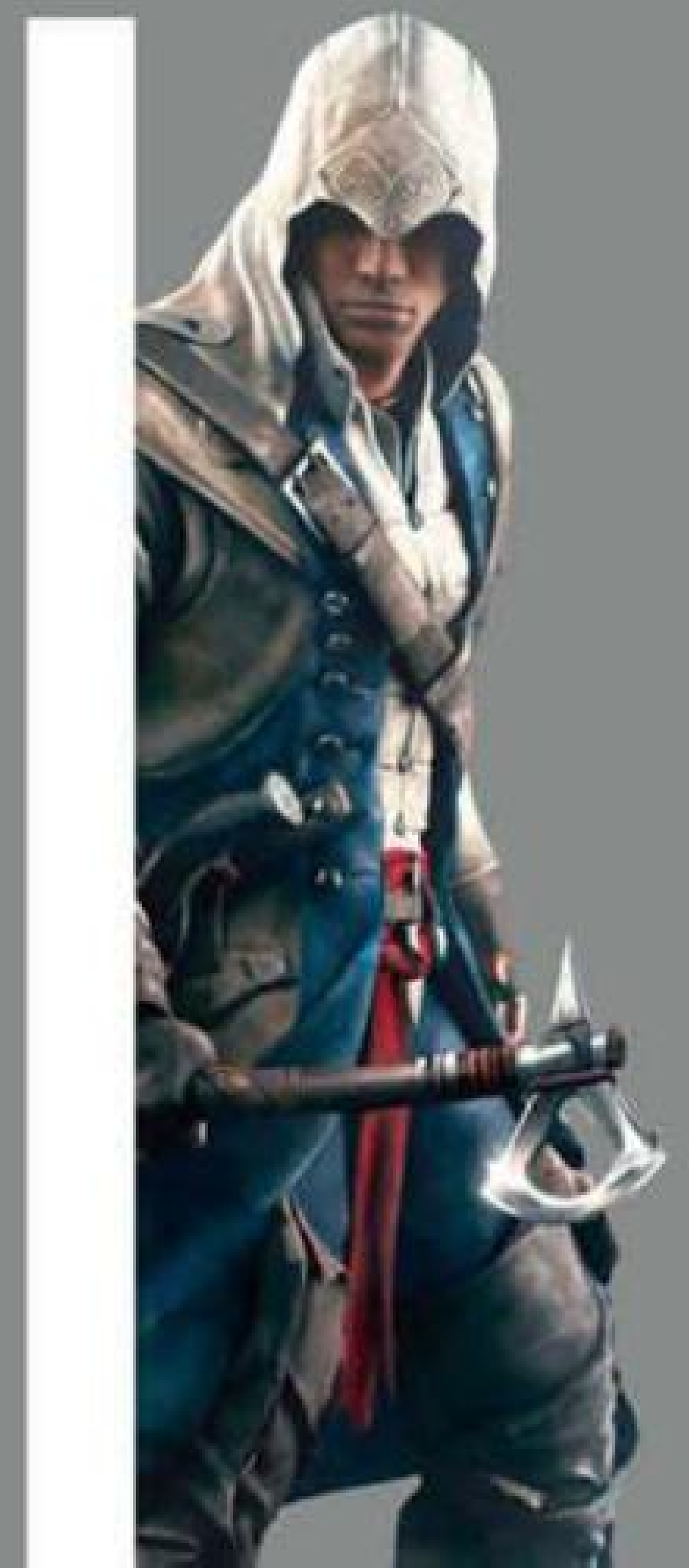
This is the pinnacle of the seventh generation



"I expect the minimum will be two to three times the current costs." **David Doak**, speaking in 2004, was decidedly fatalistic about the knock-on effect of high-definition graphics on the cost of development, foreseeing a dearth of originality as expense discouraged risk-taking. And yet Doak underestimated today's reality by some way. Back then, leading games cost an average of around $5 million to develop. Now new entries in series such as *Call Of Duty*, *Grand Theft Auto* or *The Elder Scrolls* cost upwards of $50 million to produce.

Ubisoft won't tell us how much *Assassin's Creed III* has cost to develop so far. But with 600 staff members working on it across several international Ubisoft studios, and the series' huge stature making *Assassin's Creed* the publisher's most important property, it's surely one of the largest game development projects ever undertaken. It shows. Following its publisher-set mandate of "change everything, but keep it exactly the same", Ubisoft Montreal has outfitted *ACIII* with AnvilNext, a heavily revised version of its proprietary engine, to eke just a little more from mid '00s hardware, even as a new generation is set to eclipse it. Its expansive forests are laid out not with time-saving procedural techniques but by hand by many artists, because it looks better. And Ubisoft employed an entire studio with the task of tackling how *ACIII*'s action could translate from the city to the boiling geometry of a tempestuous sea.

This is innovation as it applies to today's biggest game projects. Not in explorative invention, but in scale, wonder and technical achievement. As the costs of failure spiral, Ubisoft is taking risks, but only those it can allay itself and none that can dilute *Assassin's Creed*'s established appeal. Built by seasoned veterans, driven by refined tools and processes, and informed by expertise from across the world, *ACIII* is game creation at the culmination of its generation.



games



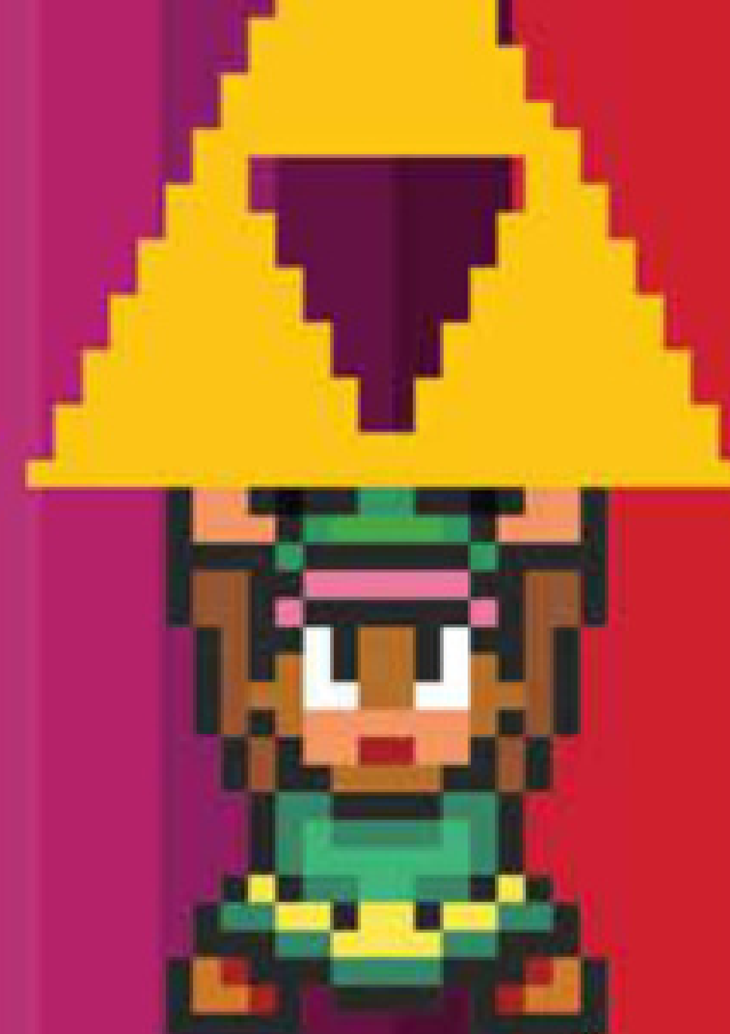


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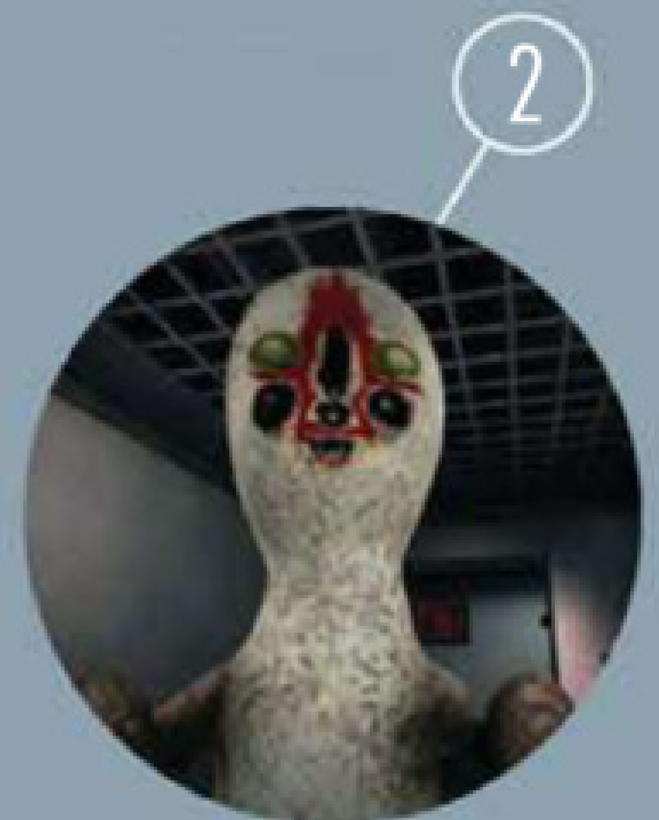
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GAMING WORLD INSIGHT, INTERROGATION AND INFORMATION















VLEDGE

We examine the plight of the middle-tier game on p10 this month. These certainly not cheap yet not quite triple-A projects, such as *Binary Domain* (1), were once an industry mainstay, so where are they now? Perhaps they're running scared from the new breed of indie horror game, such as *Containment Breach* (2). We take a closer look at these projects, made by passionate communities giving life to their myths, on p14. Less terrifying are the educational possibilities of *Minecraft* mod *MinecraftEdu* (3) the increasing presence of which in classrooms we learn about on p16. Meanwhile, our trip to Ubisoft Montreal for this month's cover story also gave us a chance to check in with the lead designers of *Far Cry 3* (4), who tell us how they went about turning a tropical paradise into a believable hell on p18. On p20, we talk to *Doom* creator John Carmack about the crowd-funded Oculus Rift (5), the headset that might just have the potential to finally deliver on the promise of virtual reality tech. Elsewhere this month. Sony Online Entertainment's John Smedly, Valve's Gabe Newell, songwriter Newton Faulkner and Ubisoft Toronto's Jade Raymond provide nuggets of insight in the Soundbytes over on p22 (6), while film and videogame writer Alex Garland (7) explains why *Ico* has such a powerful hold over him in this month's My Favourite Game on p24.



www.bit.ly/IM3xIa
Up-to-the-minute game news and views



Binary Domain is a decent game, but it couldn't compete with the top-tier. Despite an aggregate Metacritic score of 74, it fared poorly in the month after its release, selling roughly 20,000 copies. Compare that to *Mass Effect 3*'s sales of over a million boxed units in the same month

Middle dearth

The ground between the blockbuster and indie game is eroding fast. Whatever happened to the middle tier?

The waning years of this console generation have often heard it said that if you're going to play in the console space then you need to go big or go home. But the bar for what's considered big enough has been cranked up in recent years. Radical Entertainment's *Prototype 2* was an anticipated sequel, and topped the NPD Group's charts at launch. The studio itself enjoyed a decent reputation, with a history of success in the tricky licensed space.

But the game received mixed reviews and a 74 aggregate on Metacritic in an age where nothing but full-on adoration will suffice. Could Activision have given the series another go, or allocated the talent at the studio it's owned since 2008 to another project? Not these days. "Although we made a substantial investment in the *Prototype* IP, it did not find a broad commercial audience," the publisher said, calling mass layoffs its "only remaining option". The cost to the studio for only reaching the edge of good enough is the likelihood that it will never again develop its own games.

While a few short years ago, there was hot debate around whether or not Metacritic numbers offered a reliable predictor of sales, now it appears that anything under a perfectly respectable 85 might as well be a failure, even if the title in question beats modest sales expectations. Tepid scores and lower-than-hoped sales saw *Homefront* developer Kaos Studios being jettisoned by publisher THQ, which was hoping for a chart-smasher to justify its investment in the New York City studio.

Sales matter more than ever, too. Big Huge Games' *Kingdoms Of Amalur: Reckoning* made a respectable mark on the sales charts, selling 330,000 units in its first month, and while sales to date aren't available, publisher Electronic Arts credited the game with helping drive a strong fiscal quarter. But it wasn't enough to save the studio from becoming a casualty of bigger financial problems at its parent company, 38 Studios, and a planned sequel fell through the cracks as the company collapsed.

> A merely decent showing in the numbers game has become indistinguishable from a failure

And so a merely decent showing in the numbers game becomes indistinguishable from a failure. Add extenuating circumstances, as in 38 Studios' case, and the deck stacks exponentially: it takes ever-escalating resources and reach for a studio to make a title that can really compete, and companies facing financial complications must also bear a greater risk of being unable to weather the expense of being less than the best.

And the costs are getting higher. At a recent BAFTA panel, Peter Molyneux suggested that five to seven million-unit sales is about what the bar for true triple-A success ought to be these days, and pegged the expected budget at £50-80 million – quite an entry fee.

With the goalposts continually moving, a new degree of anxiety has settled over console game development.

PLAYING THE NUMBERS GAME
More evidence that the playing field at retail's getting narrower: according to the NPD Group, which tracks videogame sales in North America, there have been fewer stock-keeping units (SKUs, a unique code used to identify a product) released in July this year than during the same month last year (39 in 2011, compared to 22 in 2012). And while budgets get higher, software sales are going down – eight of the last 12 months of the year have seen contractions of at least 20 per cent, sometimes as much as 40. With such risky stats, studios are setting a high bar: There's less prosperity, and no room for moderate success.



The increasing risk aversion associated with escalating budgets makes the game industry resemble Hollywood more than ever. Strained by competition from digital media and at-home streaming, films largely stick to adaptations of pop culture books or comics, especially those that will reliably produce sequels. Logically, if one superhero movie is successful, you can bet there will be more.

Similarly, since consumers love *Call Of Duty*, a publisher such as EA clearly hopes they'll spend on *Medal Of Honor*. Yet that formula for success has proven to be less predictable than you might think. Where you'd expect genre competition to be a rising tide that lifts all boats, what more often occurs is that cash-strapped fans pick the best option among several games that look alike to them, and forsake all others. Anything that crosses the finish line behind the top one or two titles in a genre falls into the dreaded mid-tier – in that regard, no matter how fine your game is, you can still be considered middle-of-the-road if there's a title just a little bit better-established or more popular.

Notably, it's even harder for games than films. The quality and sophistication of big-budget movies such as Prometheus or Dark Knight Rises might be hotly debated on the Internet and among professional critics, and heated arguments on the plausibility of a plot or a film's faithfulness to its source material seem like part of the fun for theatre-goers. However, independently of those arguments, these films can still be expected to garner huge sales. A game whose quality is uncertain ➜





TOP ***Prototype 2*'s middling sales have ensured that the series will not continue.** RIGHT **THQ dropped *Homefront* dev Kaos Studios after it failed to produce a mega hit**



can get relegated near-instantaneously to a footnote, even with months of advance hype.

One unfortunate effect of this for consumers is decreasing variety and innovation, and fewer choices in the high-end boxed games space. This year's E3 was mostly a parade of predicable releases – a collection of widely expected franchise sequels and firstperson games where the biggest innovation amounted to simply swapping a rifle for a bow. Unfortunately for traditional developers, the proliferation of mobile and social gaming and the increasing level of interest around high-quality indie titles means gamers can – and will, apparently – look elsewhere for variety.

Industry veteran and Eidos life president **Ian Livingstone** recently warned developers of precisely this principle: "The mid-tier is going to go away because people have so much more choice on mobile platforms and Facebook today," he said at a BAFTA talk, stating that as the rich get richer, "mid-tier console games have huge problems ahead".

But there are positives, too. The decline of the mid-tier game has been partially encouraged by the rapid growth of downloadable and indie games. Titles such as *Fez, Spelunky, Journey, Dyad, Sound Shapes* (read our reviews of the latter two in this issue) all demonstrate that smaller studios and indie developers have quickly ramped up to be able to offer competitive levels of quality.

Smaller and more agile innovators have unprecedented opportunities to thrive. We're now past the age where exclusives matter, and hardware platforms increasingly depend on forming strong partnerships with unique independent developers. In a big departure from the competitive environment surrounding this generation's hardware launches, you're perhaps now more likely to see someone pick their favourite platform based on the downloadable content available for it, rather than simply the disc-based content it will enable them to play.

Gamers can get incredibly exciting and brand-new experiences delivered right to their devices at reasonable price points, and that means they don't have to pay traditional top dollar for anything other than the couple major franchises of which they're fans. In particular, the PC platform stands to benefit – as recently as 2008 analysts talked about the death of PC gaming, but thanks in large part to Steam and the ramp-up in social network and browser game quality, the PC might just be the most resilient and versatile platform for gamers. And at last it's come in a way that's not about graphics card bragging or home assembly of giant, console-outpacing rigs.

And there are long-awaited opportunities for developers, too. The once-significant console game industry in Vancouver is facing a seismic shift, with one report after another coming in of



Even with a story by a big-name writer like RA Salvatore, *Kingdoms Of Amalur* failed to crack into the top-tier. But perhaps that's hardly surprising for a new IP in a genre where a game like *Skyrim* rules the roost

layoffs. Besides the aforementioned Radical Entertainment, studios belonging to Capcom, Ubisoft and Slant Six have also been affected. Rockstar has entirely moved its studio away from the city.

That's partially because the city has long been a hub of work-for-hire culture, where the local talent has in many cases spent whole careers working on assets or user interfaces for someone else's vision. These are often the developers who end up most affected by changes in the way the triple-A community manages budget and risk.

Fewer big-budget titles means some of these work-for-hire offices rapidly shrink and close – but the affected developers then go on to launch indie, mobile and social studios, excited to take advantage of newer and less-mature platforms to develop their own small, creative games. GREE's new Vancouver studio hopes to form a launching pad that will help guide the slew of local talent there into new business models.

The metrics-driven social gaming platform and the clone-plagued mobile market especially is starving for triple-A talent, experience and expertise, and with fewer developers tied up on traditional projects, those sectors will finally get to benefit from their experience.

"The mid-tier is going to go away because people have so much more choice on mobile platforms"

In that regard, the death of the mid-tier is part of an important transition in the proliferation of a wider variety of higher-quality games – it's just not happening in the space we're used to looking, at least not for now. The long console cycle has also contributed to a slowing in high-risk investment, as companies wait for the next gen, and it will be exciting new software that platform-holders will rely upon to differentiate new hardware.

It would be a grand overstatement to say that all console fans are content with the general state of stagnation and risk aversion in their space. When the next generation begins, we can be optimistic that we'll see a rush to be new and exciting, to push new tech in unforeseen ways, and the console space might, for a while at least, be a hotbed of competition and innovation yet again.

There may well be a new – and likely expensive – rush to the top. And while just like now it won't favour the middling game, consumers will have a chance to vote with their wallets on the shape of the new landscapes. Next-gen consoles will launch to a bigger and more diverse audience than ever, one acclimatised to pick-up-and-play games as well as deep cinematic experiences. Devs will have fresh chances to establish brands and develop even more sophisticated experiences, to the benefit of all. ■

Campfire 2.0

How a new wave of independent game developers are bringing the internet's invented horrors to life

Most scary stories come from darkness. They crawl from shrouded forests, dank basements or rickety old houses and into collective consciousness. The bogeymen, the twisted maniacs, the shapes in the night. Humanity can't trace their birth. They exist because they've always existed – we just tell their story.

Not so for the Slender Man. A tall, faceless, malign figure in a suit, we know when and where the Slender Man was invented, as well as who brought him into the world: June 10, 2009, on somethingawful.com's forums, by one 'Victor Surge'.

We know too, how the impossibly tall and dangerously weird Slender Man made his way into videogames. It was the work of one Mark Hadley. Hadley's firstperson *Slender* is ritualistically simple: the player must collect eight notes scattered around a small, darkened park. There's no guarantee when or where the Slender Man, nine feet of slimline menace, will show up, but collecting more of the notes increases his chances of arrival. When he does appear, he's conspicuous by inaction. He simply stands, featureless, as the game's sound effects – previously ambient and unsettling – give way to a rising static crackle.

Like *Slender*, *SCP – Containment Breach* grew from a conspicuously man-made monster. The SCP Foundation wiki is a collaborative catalogue of the weird, stories invented and submitted by scp-wiki.net's users. Each 'SCP' – Special Containment Protocol – is given a numerical tag, and its own short description. They're all held in stasis by a shadowy organisation that supposedly keeps them under lock and key for the good of humanity. Some are silly: a vending machine that dispenses whatever liquid you request. Some are horrific: a man around 4,000 years old, decayed beyond recognition, unable to die.



www.bit.ly/OSQwSG
Full interview with Joonas Rikkonen



Containment Breach takes place after a number of these inmates have escaped. The focus is on SCP-173, a monstrous, murderous golem, purportedly "constructed of concrete and rebar with traces of Krylon brand spray paint". Blink in its presence, the story goes, and it uses the time to close in and snap your neck.

Developer **Joonas Rikkonen** found that last part most interesting when developing *Containment Breach*. "SCP-173 has always been one of my favourite SCPs, and it offers interesting possibilities when combined with the blinking mechanics." The result is a series of randomly generated corridors. Spot SCP-173 and it'll stand stock still, allowing you to back out of view to safety – but the human need to blink (measured by a bar that depletes) gives it time to get within lethal radius. A second or two is as much time as it takes for SCP-173 to close the gap: then its swollen, reddish head is inches away.

> Blink in its presence, the story goes, and it uses the time to close in and snap your neck

Or, it's not. Rikkonen wanted to scare without much direct input. He describes filmic jump cuts as "somewhat cheap," and was inspired by another take on the SCP mythos: *SCP-087*.

"[The game] basically started from [indie developer] Haversine's *SCP-087*. I was amazed that a game about descending a dark staircase with almost nothing in it could be so terrifying." As you climb down *SCP-087*'s long, rusted steps, minutes pass entombed in silence, only for the titular entity to appear at a random interval. If *Containment Breach* is an exercise in horror gaming minimalism, *SCP-087* was the form already perfected.

Despite – or perhaps as a result of – a lack of player input, people have reacted overwhelmingly positively to these pared-back, independently produced haunted houses. The internet culture that birthed Slender Man and SCP fiction voraciously consumes media built on them. YouTube is packed with playthroughs of the likes of *Containment Breach*. For Rikkonen, that's one of the best payoffs: "I love watching 'let's play' videos, and I guess some of the reactions you see in them are pretty extreme. People falling out of their chairs, pausing the game and going for a cigarette to cool their nerves."

Rikkonen cites "fear of the unknown" as his route to scaring players, but his game's subject is – as monsters go – surprisingly well-understood. But knowing how something was created doesn't seem to diminish its power, as Rikkonen himself underlines. "I've been testing the game a lot myself, as well. I've jumped a few times when 173 has popped up [unexpectedly]."

And that seems to be the power of man-made myths: handing their existence to a vast community and enabling it to bring the full force of its creativity to bear. Rikkonen references another five *SCP* games in development, and explains he's taken suggestions from players on board.

The new wave of independent horror games aim to take the normal and make it scary again. Rikkonen sums up: "Unpredictability seems to work well." ■





Containment Breach (above and right) is coded in Blitz3D engine; *Slender* (below) is made in Unity. Both engines are lightweight and reasonably quick to create games in. For Rikkonen's case, Blitz3D made sense: "To put it shortly, I was too lazy to start learning some other language or engine"





Rikkonen isn't concerned by his game's lo-fi visual quality: "Graphics have never been that high on my priority list. [Games like *Amnesia* (above)] have proved that you don't need cutting-edge graphics or millions of dollars to make a scary game." Below: *Cry Of Fear*, a *Half-Life* total conversion



SCARE TACTICS

The art of creating terror using as few tools as possible



"The randomly generated map and events are important in making *Containment Breach* scary," explains Rikkonen. No matter how many times you play it, you can never be sure what happens next. You have to constantly stay alert for SCP-173, listening for any scraping sounds and looking around when entering a room."

This lack of direct input renders interaction personal – even sensual. Rikkonen argues that games allow for the most effective scares. "Horror films [make] you afraid of something bad happening to the characters, but a game [makes] you scared for your own safety."

School of rocks

How Minecraft is being used in the classroom to teach everything from physics to forest fires

Billy is six years old and watching the world burn. "I set the ground on fire!" he giggles as flames engulf everything. His glee is a little worrying for his parents, perhaps. But it's very encouraging for the people behind what he's playing: *MinecraftEdu*.

The newest tentacle of *Minecraft*'s ever-expanding empire, *MinecraftEdu* is an easy-to-network, easy-to-modify mod aimed squarely at teachers. Created by Santeri Koivisto and **Joel Levin** – and supported by Mojang – it's put *Minecraft* in over 400 schools to date. And it's showing that children – whether guided through cooperative scenarios, or just left to explore and experiment like Billy – get an amazingly broad range of learning experiences in cube country.

"It's being used right across the curriculum," says Levin, a New York teacher who set up TeacherGaming with Santeri in 2011. "There's a science teacher in Australia who builds *Minecraft* models of cells and gets the kids to roleplay as messenger RNA inside them. A language teacher in Denmark asks his students to build and chat in English, and told me that it's been the most effective way to teach high-level mastery of the language he's ever seen."

Billy was playing *MinecraftEdu* during its recent outing at the Games Britannia festival in Rotherham. It was a smash hit on the public showfloor, the six networked PCs never empty of young *Minecraft* fans. But in meeting rooms, Santeri was wooing school groups with ingenious pre-built scenarios that showed off *MinecraftEdu*'s power to teach problem-solving and cooperation – such as teams building a bridge.

Teachers liked what they saw. *MinecraftEdu* is affordable, and offered with onsite workshops and training, and there's the option of buying 'vanilla' *Minecraft* at a significant discount. **Robert Drummond**, a primary teacher from Brockburne whose seven-year-olds "talk about *Minecraft* every time I turn on the class computer" left Games Britannia buzzing with ideas about using *MinecraftEdu* to teach English, mapmaking, maths and geography.



The parents at the festival were fans, too. *Minecraft* is that rare beast: phenomenally popular with kids – it's seen off *Moshi Monsters* and *Club Penguin* – but also highly regarded by mums and dads. "I like it because it's social," says mum-of-one **Kelly Loughlin**, "and you don't have logos and advertising on everything."

> In retrospect, it's obvious that Minecraft's near-literal sandbox is the perfect fit for classrooms

That parental approval is one of the things that's putting *Minecraft* in the tantalising position of triggering a new wave of games and computing in schools. It's resurrecting computer clubs, as children spend their lunchtimes down the mines. In retrospect, it's obvious that a near-literal sandbox is the perfect fit for classrooms – but it's taken *MinecraftEdu*'s initiative to lift computer game use in primary and junior schools beyond traditional, prescriptive educational software.

Harvey McCarthey, head teacher of Filey Junior School in North Yorkshire, has found some unexpected and encouraging effects. "Some children are unsettled and struggle to get on with others," he says. "Put them in *MinecraftEdu*, and they're working together, cooperative and focused." Crucially, he's also found that *Minecraft* crosses the gender gap: boys are more naturally open to it, but after girls are introduced, "the next day, they tell you they played the demo all night".

Admittedly, *MinecraftEdu* has some way to go. McCarthey's school has a forward-thinking approach to IT, and he's a gamer and *Minecraft* early adopter. "To convince non-gamer teachers, it's going to need ready-made packages of educational ideas with lesson plans and schemes of work," he says. "As with any new innovation, it needs passionate people to champion it."

That's already happening. On YouTube, Tumblr and the MinecraftEdu Wiki, a growing community of teachers – including Levin – are keeping diaries of their *Minecraft* lessons. There's debate and exploration of open-ended sandbox play versus directed scenarios, and tutorials about how to investigate maths and volume, explore digital citizenship, or use redstone to teach about electricity. By the time you read this, TeacherGaming should have added simple scenario sharing to *MinecraftEdu* too.

Innovative as the teaching community is, it's likely the kids who will drive *MinecraftEdu*'s success. After a tweet from Notch in February, it was students who pestered teachers to bring *Minecraft* into the classroom. As Santeri says: "How many other teaching tools are bought by schools because students demanded it?"

"I started out just playing *Minecraft* with my own kids, and using it in my classes," says Levin. "To take these customisations that I coded myself, and wrap them in a package for schools worldwide – that's really gratifying." ■



TeacherGaming wasn't left with many cardboard heads after *Minecraft*-obsessed kids started pleading for them at Games Britannia. And its generosity continued at August's QuakeCon, where it gave away 1000 copies of the teacher-friendly *Minecraft* mod (below) at its BYOC LAN event



The kids showed massive cooperation: building, discussing, playing – and sometimes smashing everything to pieces











Minecraft's potential for teaching the value of cooperation is obvious, from common courtesies up. Midway through one of Joel Levin's lessons (right), his students swiftly progressed from an every-child-for-themself melee to forming an orderly queue for ladders

LONECRAFT

Figuring out the rules is part of learning



Mojang directly supplied TeacherGaming with *Minecraft* source code, allowing them to make easily teacher-friendly changes to the game. The host machine runs a simple user interface that allows teachers to write messages on in-world objects, give items to players, set up guided 'assignments' for students – and freeze them if crafting only mischief. Many teachers prefer to leave kids to their own devices – to figure out the rules, fostering emergent learning. But there have been some remarkable directed experiences: Levin recently crafted a huge resource-management experience based on The Hunger Games for a game jam run by Mozilla and Brooklyn Public Library.

Island hopping

Exploring the troubled island paradise of Far Cry 3 with the game's lead designers

The *Far Cry* series has always prided itself on creating exotic locales so vividly imagined that you immediately feel the itch to explore. We visited Ubisoft Montreal to sit down with *Far Cry 3*'s lead designer **Jamie Keen** and producer **Dan Hay** in order to get a clearer sense of what sorts of surprises await players in the game's dangerous island archipelago. Psychos and tigers and guns, oh my!

We've only seen leafy jungle so far. How much does the terrain vary?

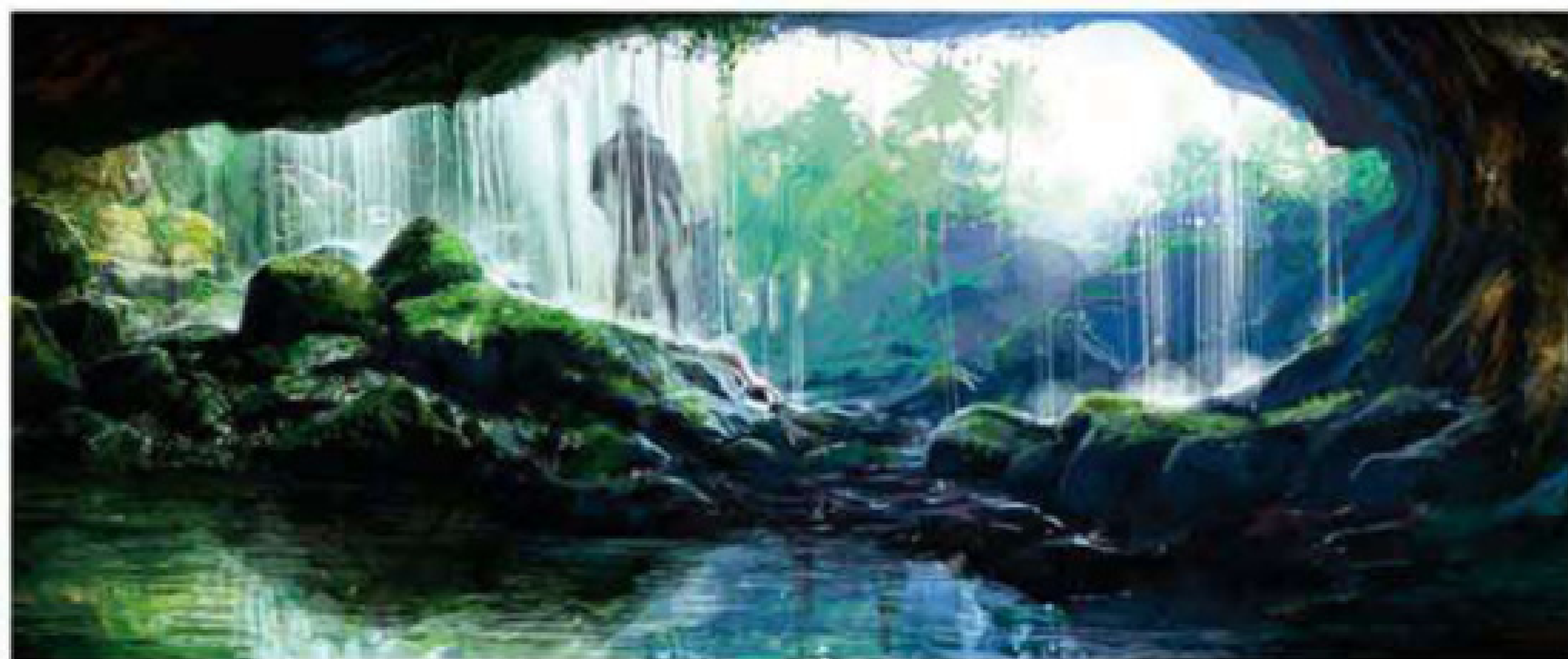
Dan Hay: It has to feel real. If you were to go on to a real island like this – and we did our homework – there would be alcoves, there would be cave networks, there would be huge waterfalls and there would be massive mountains. In some places it's going to be fairly arid, and in other places it's going to be lush. Some places are going to be jungle and other places are going to be mini islands that take you along the archipelago, and I mean like small islands where you find yourself actually driving through the water to get between the connecting islands. When we talk about exploration, that there's something different around every corner, it starts with the visuals.

Jamie Keen: Jungle can be so many different things, and there are so many different experiences you can have within that, from lovely underwater areas with sunken wrecks right to the top of this mountain range. You can have wider open spaces, you can have these bamboo forests where it's just this beautiful green light as you're winding your way through it.

"The bulk of the team had very real experiences where they lived at least portions of Jason Brody's story"

What sort of research was involved?

DH: We sat down and said, 'OK guys, let's bring our own personalities into this'. The nice thing about Ubi is that it's got a really deep bench in terms of people who make games and travel. Jamie's been all over the place, I've been all over the place. I've spent a year and a half in Asia and more specifically a month in Thailand. And so we pull on our own experiences. And you think, 'OK, well you had a story here, you had this, you experienced this, what was real when you did it?' And we found that the bulk of the team had very real experiences in the past where they have lived at least portions of the hero Jason Brody's story, and pulled from that.

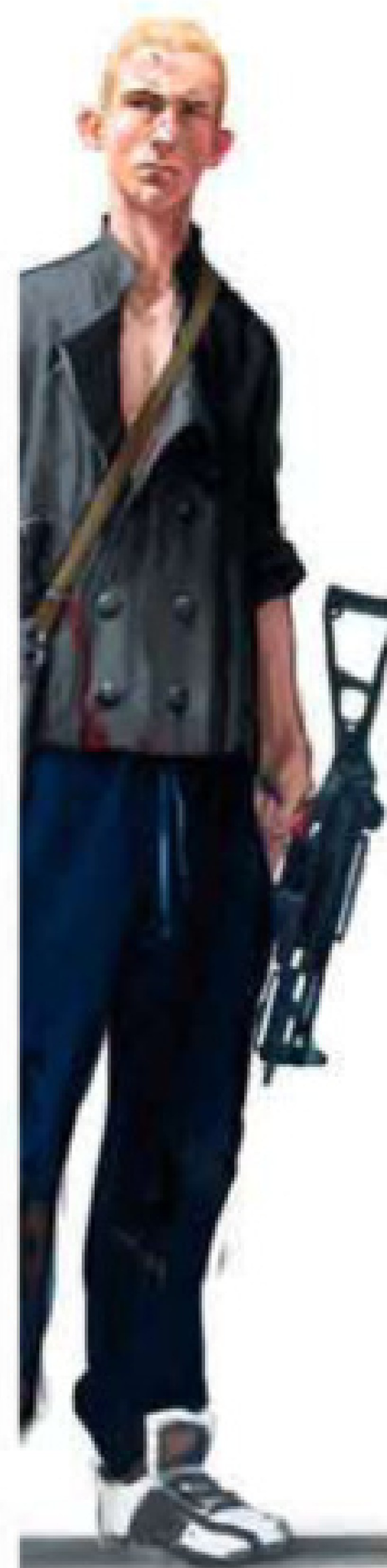


Hay refers to the main characters populating the island as 'personality bombs'. One called The Doctor can apparently be found meandering through the cave system hunting for psychotropic mushrooms





Dan Hay (top) is *Far Cry 3*'s producer, while Jamie Keen (above) is the lead designer



How much have you had to augment the tech used in *Far Cry 2*?

JK: *Far Cry 2* was absolutely our benchmark and our kind of base level and there's been an evolution from there. It's a different animal, though, working with an island. *Far Cry 2* was very level because it was inland Africa. It's a different set of requirements. So there have been some areas we've really had to bolster. I think the most challenging aspect has been the vista views, because now we have these mountains where you have these long vistas and have to make sure that we keep the visual fidelity over these long viewpoints, which isn't something that *Far Cry 2* had to think about as much.

The creators of Lost enjoyed extra creative licence by giving their island supernatural properties. How does *FC3* subvert the ordinary?

DH: We wanted to make sure that we didn't go super sci-fi or something. If you went over there and you did some peyote or some other kind of drug, or you started to hallucinate because you've been out in the sun too long, you're going to have a unique experience. And for us that was our entry point into something that was completely different and not normal. So you're going to hallucinate, and you're going to have an experience that allows us to put in a language that is completely different from what you'd expect. ■

Brody will have a camera, but it will serve as a tool for making sense of his surroundings and finding collectables, not as a means for taking pretty pictures



www.bit.ly/MkXzDm
Explore the design of *Far Cry 3*'s main character

REALITY CHECK

The crowd-funded and crowd-developed Oculus Rift makes virtual reality an actuality

John Carmack's own Oculus Rift is all duct tape and bulky plastic, fastened to his head with a strap from a pair of skiing goggles. It looks very little like the Oculus Rift its creator Palmer Luckey funded in a matter of hours on Kickstarter, but at E3 Carmack was instrumental in introducing the Rift to the world and proving that virtual reality is possible after two decades of false starts.

"I thought surely after 20 years we would have the device that everybody always wanted, but it still wasn't there at all," says Carmack. Disappointed by even DARPA's attempts at virtual reality, id Software's technical director set about mounting his own screens inside welding goggles and stripping motion sensor tech from his Armadillo Aerospace rockets to build a better headset, while simultaneously working on a new version of *Doom 3* for 3DTVs and – speculatively – his own headset. Meanwhile, in California, a console modder named Palmer Luckey had built the device Carmack was aiming for but lacked Carmack's motion sensors or software.

"He sent me one of the two prototypes and I integrated my trackers and built software for it," says Carmack. "And it works. But even now I focus on all the faults, I know all these things I need to do to improve it, but you can see a little bit of future here. And you can kind of see how things will be once it's all wireless and it's like picking up your iPad and putting it on your head and you enter this new world."

Carmack is the first high-profile developer to support the project with a real game, and it's immediately intuitive. Very quickly you learn to make big movements with your controller while using the headset for spatial awareness and micro-level aiming adjustments. Look over a ledge and there's a real sense of vertigo; it's a trick good enough to fool your brain.

The Rift version of *Doom 3* fired imaginations at E3, and two months later Luckey's Kickstarter hit its $250,000 goal in an afternoon. It's now pushing well beyond $1,500,000, and while the first headsets will be DIY kits resembling Carmack's heavyweight goggles, the first mass-produced Rift is sleek and lightweight, intended to cost just $300. Each eye sees a 640x800 window on the world with a 110° field of view. An Alpha SDK and headset is available to backers, and support for Unreal Engine and Unity will be ready in time for the arrival of the first DIY kits.

"Right now it's just about building excitement," says Carmack. "We can improve it, but already it's exciting enough. You could pull any developer from any booth around here, put him in here, say 'Check this out,' and they're going to want to support it with their game, just for themselves. Who cares about the market? This is just too cool not to support." ■



Tipping the scales at a projected half a pound, the Rift should be light enough to wear comfortably

Soundbytes

Game commentary in snack-sized mouthfuls



"Stupid decisions... **Complete and utter fail** and I am very sorry."

President of Sony Online Entertainment **John Smedley** delivers a Reddit apology for the *Star Wars Galaxies*' updates that arguably drove it into the ground

"I think Windows 8 is a catastrophe for everyone in the PC space."

Gabe Newell on why Valve is looking to Linux as a platform for Steam's heaving catalogue





"I wrote lyrics to ***Sonic The Hedgehog*** on the Sega Mega Drive... The lyrics were 'Who killed my baby,' which is a bit strange for a six-year-old."

Singer-songwriter **Newton Faulkner** on the macabre inspiration of his childhood

"Kinect and other more natural ways to interact with games are incredibly important. I think we can go further."

Ubisoft's **Jade Raymond** talks up the importance and potential of motion control



ARCADE WATCH

Keeping an eye on the coin-op gaming scene



Game Dark Escape 4D
Manufacturer Namco Bandai Games

Namco's *Dark Escape 4D* combines the joys of an arcade lightgun game and amusement park ride. The setup is old-fashioned – a two-player shooting gallery where you take on the mutant underworld and a sadistic ringmaster – but the execution is as cutting-edge as it gets. An enclosed cabinet with moving force-feedback seats, wind effects, 3D glasses and 5.1 channel stereo all amount to a sensorial assault on a scale rarely seen in the arcade. Then there are the two handles on your gun, which function as a heart-rate monitor displaying your excitement/fear on-screen as the scares ramp up.

The game itself has been constructed like a roller-coaster ride, delivering its shocks in split-second doses. The monsters of *Dark Escape* can come from any direction, any time, jolting your seat, blasting you with directional audio, and leaping out of the dark. The elaborate cabinet trimmings are what make the game stand out – the delivery of this standard fare in a dazzling theatre – and make *Dark Escape 4D* both familiar enough to rope you in and fresh enough to keep you plugging coins into it.



My favourite game Alex Garland

The respected film writer talks the beleaguered Halo movie, BioShock and an affection for zombies

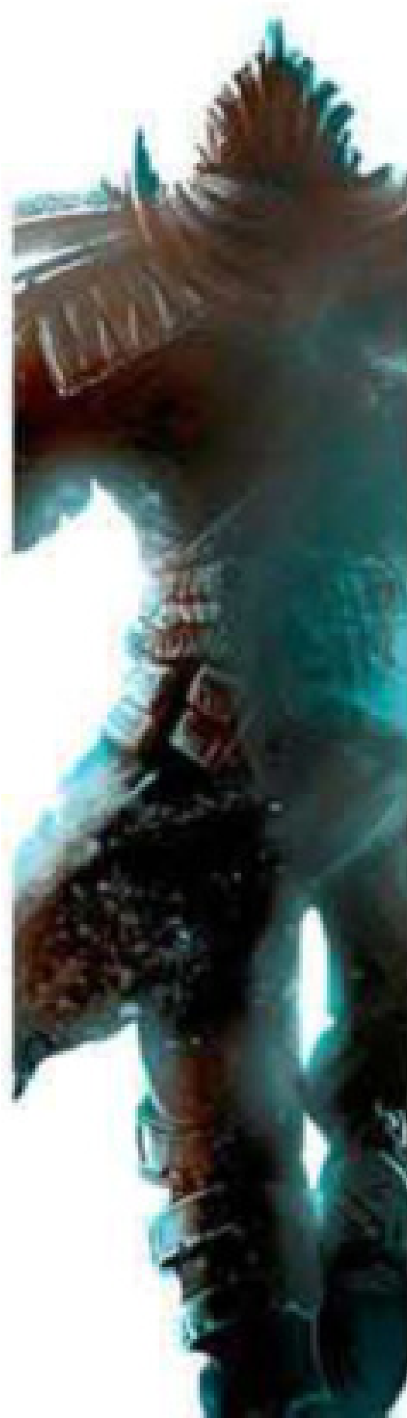
Novelist and screenwriter **Alex Garland** has explored several genres in his film projects, ranging from zombie horror (28 Days Later) to interstellar sci-fi (Sunshine) to comic book fantasy (Dredd). We talk to him about his contribution to the ill-fated *Halo* movie, the oversaturation of zombie games and the action-RPG that awakened his love of singleplayer console gaming.

In your professional opinion, what's the high point of games writing to date?
The best writing I've seen in a game has to be the first *BioShock*. It's clearly a big game, but I thought *BioShock* also had a kind of underground sensibility. In some ways it feels more connected to *Braid* than it does to *Call Of Duty*. It's referencing Ayn Rand for Christ's sake. And the narrative twist really hit me between the eyes. The reveal about the way in which you'd been controlled, and how it functioned as a meta-argument on how people play games and the way a game's designer will control players without them realising they're being controlled – at that point, I just felt like sitting down and thinking for six hours, because I was so impressed by what those developers had pulled off.

The movie adaptation of *BioShock* is in development hell. Did you get a taste of what that's like with your involvement in the aborted *Halo* movie?
I didn't really. I mean, I got hired to write a script. I wrote the script, I handed it in and that was it.

The script had some rewrites. Did you get feedback on the concerns with it?
There were no concerns initially. That was the draft that they financed and sold, and then the concerns began. When I'm working as a writer for hire, I'll do the best job I can, and that's kind of it. But I've got much more emotional connection to a project I can't get sacked from, where I've worked on it because I've chosen to. I doubt I'll ever get hired to do something like that *Halo* script again, because I've done it a couple of times and it's never worked out. So why would they keep paying me money to do it? It doesn't make any sense. I wouldn't pay me to do it, I'll put it that way.

STORYTELLER
Hailing from London, Alex Garland's career as a novelist began in earnest with the publication of The Beach in 1996. Danny Boyle eventually adapted it into a film, starting a partnership that continues to this day through production company DNA Films. Garland's written two other novels – The Tesseract (1998) and The Coma (2004) – but continues to be best known for his screenwriting, including 28 Days Later, Sunshine and the initial script for the aborted *Halo* movie. Most recently, the writer penned the screenplay for Dredd, based on the 2000 AD comic hero co-created by John Wagner.



Your script for 28 Days Later helped spur a renaissance in the zombie genre. Are there fresh stories left to tell now?
Zombies is just a genre, like vampires or aliens. You can reinvent them and keep working them as long as you want… In terms of their life within games, I personally like *Plants Vs. Zombies* very much. So yes, there's still life in the old dog.

"I'm understanding that the reason my ideas might have been rejected is that they weren't any fucking good"

Do you have any theories on why videogames ping-pong between Star Wars and Lord Of The Rings?
Adolescent preoccupations. Without naming any names, I've pitched ideas to videogame publishers, which they've rejected on the grounds that essentially they're not mainstream enough. I've been shown pie charts that show gamer interests, and all I can say is that I don't think that's a very good way to go about the business. And it's not really how the big movie studios go about the business either. Warner would not have made Inception if they thought along those lines. And as a business proposition, that was obviously a good thing to do. I'm talking in very broad terms here, and I'm very understanding that the reason my ideas might have been rejected is that they weren't any fucking good.

***Enslaved* followed a fairly linear narrative. Being an interactive form, do games have a responsibility to let players' choices shape the narrative?**
Nah, I don't think that games have a responsibility to do it. I just think that it's a great tool that's at games' disposal. They can use it or not use it, just as you might shoot a film in colour or black and white. I should say that with *Enslaved*, though, that was Tameem Antoniades' structure and narrative. I arrived to that project late and was there to bring it together, not to come up with it. But you can have a completely valid game that does not have a branching structure, and often the branching-structure bit, as *Mass Effect 3* found out to its cost, is the bit that can most piss people off or make them feel let down.

Favourite game?
So I played *Dark Souls* this year, and that game reawakened my enthusiasm for singleplayer gaming on a console. I felt like I was accessing this really wonderful, slightly alien Japanese imagination, and it made me think a lot about *Ico*, which is another game I really love. But for me it was even better than *Ico*, because it felt less like playing a narrative and more like playing a dream… I know how flowery this sounds, but I mean it. For me at that moment, it was a holistically perfect game. ■

Garland co-wrote *Enslaved: Odyssey To The West*, Ninja Theory's critical darling, and has subsequently pitched a number of videogame projects



www.bit.ly/OfhBMx
More gaming talk with Alex Garland

WEBSITE
Please Register This Shareware
www.bit.ly/R7MAAp

It's tempting to pretend that the freemium model is a recent trend in the videogame industry. But you can wind the clock back 20 years and you'll find that shareware developers were tackling the problem of how to lure in players with the promise of a free game and then convince them to register that game and pay money for it. Please Register This Shareware offers a tickling glimpse back at some of those early pitches. Some are silly; others are more earnest. All are nostalgic. There are no punchlines. The relevant game screenshots are presented with information about the game's developer and year of release, which makes the site less about yucks and more about preserving a feature of gaming's past that continues to inform its future.





VIDEO
Kuratas from Suidobashi Heavy Industry
www.bit.ly/OUcHot

When Suidobashi Heavy Industry turned up at this year's Wonderfest hobbyist expo in Tokyo, it aimed to impress with gargantuan mechs called Kuratas. According to SHI's website, not only is it fully operational, you can actually *buy* one. It'll set you back around $1.5 million, depending on customisations. The only downside is the aesthetic – it's big, grey and looks like something a tank threw up. And then, of course, there's the issue of getting it insured for those trips to Tesco.

WEB GAME
Flee, Fish, Flee!
www.bit.ly/QtGIQM

Saying the tongue-twisting title of Craig Forrester and Jonathan Whiting's TIGJam UK 7 entry aloud is far from easy, but its gameplay is the very picture of simplicity. *Flee, Fish, Flee!* is a turn-based puzzle game that involves steering a cute purple fish through a brief series of tile-based underwater grids to collect diamonds. Every time you advance one tile in any direction, however, your pink blowfish and starfish enemies move simultaneously. Since every character on the board remains static until you take your next move, there's a contemplative, unhurried flow to the game, in puzzling opposition to the title's panicked warning. The game takes five to ten minutes to play start to finish, which in gaming terms makes the experience as perfectly digestible as a bite of sushi.



THIS MONTH ON EDGE

A miscellany of matters that tugged at our attention during the production of **E**245

EDGE INSERT COIN TEES
www.insertcoinclothing.com/edge/

Insert Coin has built a reputation on making videogames trendy with its lines of T-shirts and hoodies, which cover everything from Sonic to Stranger's Wrath. It's long overdue, then, that it teams up with that other bastion of style… err… us. **Edge**'s art editor Andrew Hind designed these two **Edge**-branded T-shirts, available now from the online clothing specialist. Both take their cue from vintage graphical forms, the grey shirt a nod to the dithering techniques used to expand the Spectrum's limited colours, while the midnight blue recalls the early days of 3D, which used shading to evoke solid forms. Either design can be yours for £25 plus P&P.



continue

Steam's rise
Designed with an eye on its users, every new feature is a step towards an even better platform

Kinect 2 spec leak
Maybe it'll work better the next time around!

Team Fortress lore
We're hooked on the twists and turns of the ultimate brotherly feud

Half-Life 3 rumours
How better to while away the summer than with dreams of Gordon?

quit

Zynga's fall
EA's all-out attack, insider trading, execs cashing out, crashing value: a sick company

Kinect 2 spec leak
Will developers have better design ideas?

eShop inflation
Nintendo's being *ironic* pricing *NSMB2* at £40 on the eShop, right?

Battle.net hack
Time yet again to think up a memorable/clever alphanumeric password

TWEETS

If the *Persona* team made a *Zelda* game. That's what I'd play.
Steve Gaynor @fullbright
Co-founder of The Fullbright Company

In my vision of the future, gender/sex discrimination has been solved and is not a thing. Our *Aliens* game reflects this ideal.
Randy Pitchford @DuvalMagic
President, Gearbox Software

Received Linkedin request: "I am an investor looking for good projects to invest on. Do you have any?" That's exactly how investing works.
Giordano Contestabile @giordanobc
Franchise business director, PopCap

Actually Freemium is a lot like Scientology. Little bit of cheap feelgood to get you in, then shaking you down regularly ever after.
Jeff Minter @llamasoft_ox
Founder, Llamasoft



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DISPATCHES OCTOBER

Within Dispatches this issue, Dialogue sees **Edge** readers give their differing takes on *Heavy Rain*'s qualities. Does it portray women badly? Or is it a milestone in the development of interactive entertainment? They also celebrate the Master Chief and enjoy *Mass Effect 3*'s new ending. Then in Perspective, **Steven Poole** looks back at Hideo Kojima's true masterpiece, *Metal Gear Solid 2*; **Leigh Alexander** considers the double-headed nature of nostalgia; and **Brian Howe** relates the awards speech of one of gaming's legendary Japanese-to-English translators.



www.next-gen.biz/forum
Discuss gaming topics with fellow **Edge** readers



Issue 244

Dialogue



Send your views to edge@futurenet.com, using 'Dialogue' as the subject. Our letter of the month wins a 3DS

Heavy shame

It was with no small amount of surprise that I read David Cage's responses to your interview questions in the latest issue of **Edge**. Cage is asked about the depiction of women in videogames, to which he responds, "A lot of games take place in a teenager's fantasy world where... women are sexual objects. They have big breasts and wear provocative clothes, but most of the time they never engage in explicit sexual activity... They correspond to a very immature vision of womanhood in general."

I found such a response interesting, since I had always believed *Heavy Rain* to possess some of the poorest treatment of female characters in any story-driven current-gen game to date. Madison Paige is introduced to the player via a scene in which she strips naked for a shower (accompanied by some gratuitous breast shots) before being assaulted in her home while dressed only in her underwear. This scene is then revealed to be a dream that has absolutely zero bearing on the rest of the plot and seems to exist only to provide the titillation David Cage apparently rails against. The threat of sexual violence is brought up once again later, and Madison's main contribution to the plot consists of a minigame in which she must 'slut' herself up in the bathroom of a club, before stripping at gunpoint for the sexual titillation of a gangster. This, combined with the 'sex bot' theme of Quantic Dream's latest tech demo, whose resolution implies that a fully sentient (essentially human) being must resign herself to being part of the sex industry if she is to survive, makes me feel some relief that, despite Mr Cage's claims to the contrary, his games are not at the forefront of storytelling in our industry.

Consider *Red Dead Redemption*, *Mass Effect*, *Limbo* and even *Grand Theft Auto IV* (all of which, with the exception of *Limbo*, contain some of the strongest and most realistic depictions of female characters I've seen in games. Who didn't fall in love with Bonnie MacFarlane the moment she was introduced? No breasts required!). From the heartbreaking climaxes they present, it is clear that games are more than capable of dealing with mature themes such as fatherhood, loss and redemption without resorting to gratuitous and outdated tropes from television.

As the sophistication of narrative in other areas of the industry increases, it is becoming increasingly clear that Mr Cage's talents as a writer are being overshadowed and if he wants to remain a spokesperson for narrative vision in games then he needs to leave his teenage fantasies (of women in particular) behind.
Toby Foyle

Those scenes made us uncomfortable, too, but then again, similarly schlocky thrillers on film commonly display the same exploitative attitudes and rarely face the same criticism. Is that a misstep by film fans? We're not sure. Your letter wins this issue's 3DS. By the way, true story: our *Heavy Rain* review code was supplied with a debug mode that included a free-roaming camera, showing us how complete the character models were in the game's two shower scenes. We can confirm that both Ethan and Madison are fully realised. So that's equality of a sort.

Heavy gain

Over the years, thousands of games have been issued on many different platforms. Sometimes, from the relentless wave of digital creation, a very good game will come along. We've all played some. It's the kind of game that, whether it makes you smile, laugh or cry, does make you want to quit your job to fully immerse yourself in the new binary world offered to you. Some games are great, some aren't. Nothing new there. But sometimes – very rarely, but it's happening more and more – a game will be released that will show players what they have been missing from the trade and will show developers the shape of things to come.

Resident Evil, *Metal Gear Solid*, *Ico* or even *LA Noire* are all games that, in their respective times, opened new creative directions and helped building a more capable industry. Quantic Dream's *Heavy Rain* is another good example. The psychological thriller is an emotional adventure and undoubtedly an important milestone for the future of the interactive entertainment industry.

It will not be long before a student in literature will be able to pass an optional module in game design and gaming history, and before such games will be as widely played by the general public as Catch-22 and Oliver Twist have been read.

But is it worth, as a business, taking an artistic risk over producing another FPS? The young history of the trade has shown that the sales of such games are getting more convincing as the industry and the player matures. (The average player is around 35 years old). *Shadow Of The Colossus* might have sold only around 600,000 units, but *Heavy Rain* has sold more than 2 million. Enough for David Cage to come back with more and to bring us *Beyond: Two Souls*.

Not all developers will want to go this way. Then again, for those who want to lead the way on the path less travelled, for those who are inspired and want to inspire, may they be reassured to know that the players – along with the market – are ready for it.
Joris Larigaldie

Heavy Rain's big ambitions are at the core of the wildly varying responses it faces. Establishing an emotionally complex

premise in a narrative genre characterised by deep, twisting storylines sets up a raft of formidable expectations and comparisons. Whether you feel *Heavy Rain* succeeded or failed, it's one of its generation's most memorable games, and Cage's next project is bound to be as interesting.

Bow to the Chief

It's a bit belated, but I loved your *Halo 4* cover for **E**243. I don't know what it is, but a decent piece of artwork will get me just as pumped as any trailer, although the original version of the 'Accolades' trailer (same footage, just without all the accolades) also did a good job. Wub wub ftw.

I'm honestly feeling optimistic about *Halo 4* – it's about time the Master Chief came back. *Halo: Reach*, while technically and visually the best *Halo* offering to date, disappointed me on a personal level because of the lack of the franchise's iconic hero. Granted, *Reach* wasn't about him (and as someone who's read all the books, I did appreciate the 'official' acknowledgement of other Spartans), but that doesn't mean he couldn't have been glimpsed or talked about more often. If Bungie/343 are still sticking to the charade that the Fall Of Reach novel is still canon, then the Chief was there, fighting the losing battle with the rest of them before being packed onto the Pillar Of Autumn. Considering *Halo: Reach* was Bungie's last ever *Halo* game, they could have paid better homage to the man who made the series what it is.

"I'm honestly feeling optimistic about Halo 4 – it's about time the Master Chief came back"

Anyway, nerd rant over. I've always liked *Halo*, or the story and the universe. It's had its ups and downs (wasn't a fan of the Master Chief/Arbiter timeshare of *Halo 2*), so I'm looking forward to seeing what the Reclaimer trilogy has to offer. Plus, on a professional level, I'm excited to see how successful Spartan Ops is going to be – there's yet to be really decent and consistent offering as far as dedicated episodic gaming content goes, and 343 seems to have gone all out here. Story-relevant missions, cooperative gameplay, the first season is free... Yes, I'm feeling very optimistic indeed.
Joe Robinson


Joe Robinson writes that *Halo 4*'s restoration of the Master Chief has left him feeling optimistic for the game

We won't ask what on Earth you mean about Fall Of Reach not being canon, but we share your admiration for John-117. What is it about the Chief? Is it his resolute strength? His stoic bravery? Probably a bit of both. And a big plus is that he keeps his mouth shut for a lot of the time. He doesn't grumble about the mission, or wisecrack about his squadmates. He doesn't express surprise or fear – he just gets on with it. It's nice to have space to feel what we want about the games' events, and not to have to see them through the prism of what a scriptwriter has decided that our character feels about them. He gets bonus marks for not being just another bald marine, too. Because he isn't just a bald marine under that helmet, right, 343? And you wouldn't actually go showing us, would you?

End times

I feel that *Mass Effect 3*'s revised Extended Cut ending solves all of the issues and plot holes raised in the original ending. Personally, I withstood the wave of dislike that other users experienced, feeling that the early missions of the story more than made up for the lacklustre ending. After all, it's the journey that's important, not what happens at the end. I was sceptical at first, due to the small scale of the Extended Cut, but in actuality, they did a perfect job of providing clarity and a sense of continuity by explaining what happens after the ending. How this will affect future *Mass Effect* games is yet to be seen. I've been hooked on the series since *Mass Effect 2* and I really do enjoy the story and plot in this franchise far above any other. In most games, comrades are cannon fodder, but in *Mass Effect*, you actually care for them and want to keep them safe, no matter the cost. Truly the pinnacle of videogame entertainment.
Alexander Filipowski

Yes, if the furore around *Mass Effect 3*'s ending proved anything, it's that the series did a superb job of building a story and a set of characters that made players really care about them. It seems unlikely that BioWare is kicking itself for making something that's inspired such passion.

ONLINE OFFLINE

Your responses to topics on our website at www.edge-online.com

Is Seamus Blackley right to encourage developers to forget business models and focus on fun?

The meaning of 'fun' differs from person to person. I think businesses should try and innovate and create something fun to play, rather than aiming purely to make the most money possible.
Jamie Read, Facebook

Yep. 'Fun' is definitely what games should be. The last game I actually had fun playing was *Bulletstorm* – it gave you a set of gaming mechanics and asked you to be creative to earn points. Most other games seem to want you to work rather than have fun.
Neal Molyneaux, Facebook

Games should try and get an emotion from you I think. Fear, sadness, joy, concern, etc. A game doesn't necessarily have to be 'fun' to be fun. A game that gets an emotion is halfway there methinks.
Grippa Brown, Facebook

Are fans too entitled?

What's the problem with entitled fans? They spent £40 on your game in austere times, they can be as entitled as they want.
Laurie Cinco James, Facebook

Entitled fans will kill any creative endeavour. Once you take the control away from creative people the quality goes with it. If you bought a game and didn't like it, I'm sorry but that's nobody's fault but your own. Do more research before making a purchase. That being said there is a vast difference between not getting what you want, and not getting what you paid for.
John Lloyd, Facebook



marshdavies.com



STEVEN POOLE

Trigger Happy

Metal Gear Solid 2, Hideo Kojima's inventive masterpiece, still seems fresh a decade on

Some works of art only reveal the full extent of their genius long after they first appear. Maybe initial-release expectations were wrongly managed; maybe the 'story' of the creator or the production process overshadowed the story embedded in the artwork itself. Only later can such a work be fairly appreciated. Take Michael Cimino's Heaven's Gate: on its release, the 'story' was its massive budget, and it flopped; now it's widely considered a tour de force. The same can be true of videogames. I remember when *Metal Gear Solid 2: Sons Of Liberty* was released in 2001 to stellar review scores, but also to fanboy bitching about how you didn't get to play most of the game as Snake, along with complaints about the sheer quantity and length of cutscenes. After I completed it the first time, it became in my memory a kind of in-between game, a relative valley between the near-perfect peaks of the Shadow Moses incident and *Snake Eater* – ambitious but deeply flawed. But now, playing through *MGS2* again on my Vita, I realise I was wrong. It's a stone-cold classic, a masterpiece.

Merely to list some of the deliciously eccentric inventions in *MGS2* is to put nearly every other military-espionage-themed game before or since to creative shame. At base, as Kojima himself describes it, it's a "game of hiding". But which other works in this medium allow you to stuff a snoozing, tranquillised guard into a locker, or throw him overboard from a ship? Which other designers have had the idea to make the playfield the arena for a workout (pull-ups to increase ledge-hanging endurance) as well as your work? Which other boss characters say things like, "I'm an artist. That is why I dislike boorish military types"? Who else would think to create a marvellously tense set-piece out of listening for someone's pacemaker? Which other videogame series veers so confidently (and persuasively) between grand, paranoid nuclear-geopolitical melodrama and 'Buster' Keaton-esque slapstick? (And if it weren't for the seagulls on whose droppings you slip, the beautifully atmospheric soundscape of the Plant would be significantly compromised.)

The tiniest of touches in *MGS2* is carefully thematic: for instance, the fact that you can only access the game options when interacting with a terminal in the Plant. And those cutscenes? Sure, it's still annoying that you don't know if your next footstep will propel you into a half-hour movie. But on this playthrough, it's embarrassingly clear that the story of *MGS2*, with its mythic wit and sweep, is still in a different league from the vast majority of videogame yarns. Compared to a *COD* or *Gears*, or even a *Mass Effect*, *MGS2* is like the work of Ingmar Bergman.

> Compared to a COD or Gears, or even a Mass Effect, MGS2 is like the work of Ingmar Bergman

More than a decade on, then, *Sons Of Liberty* still feels fresh and groundbreaking, and markedly more inventive than nearly anything at this year's E3, the annual videogame-sequel expo. In one way, that marks a little-noticed paradigm shift in the way we can now enjoy videogames of the past. Ten years ago, to play a videogame that had been made ten years before that would have been 'retrogaming', an exercise in connoisseurship, displaying one's own subtle discrimination in being able to look past the blocky, crude graphics of yesteryear and still appreciate the gameplay like a fine wine. But today we can play a decade-old game with only minimal visual sharpening up and it's no longer retrogaming at all, it's just gaming.

In another way, however, the fact that *MGS2* still seems so avant-garde today might well prompt a worry: does it represent the pinnacle of a now-vanished era, the age of the experimental mainstream? This was, after all, a big-budget commercial boxed product that gleefully took risks and subverted genre conventions at every turn. Modern blockbuster games play it painfully safe by comparison.

Of course, in another way, we live right now in a golden age of experimentation, with indie developers able to distribute their creations on PSN, XBLA, or iOS. (It's surely better to have Polytron or Molleindustria or 22Cans around than not.) But ours is a Manichean era: on the one hand, the low-budget experiment; on the other hand, the big-budget conservatism. At the expensive end, innovation now occurs mainly in hardware rather than in-play lexicon, though with the hope that developments in one will encourage new ideas in the other (Vita's rear touch-panel, Kinect, Wii U's touchscreen controller). Happily, there are still a few exceptions: David Cage is certainly making experimental triple-A games, the showing of *Watch Dogs* at E3 hinted at something remarkable if achieved, and Miyamoto and Kojima are still working, if in roles that are somewhat less hands-on.

But *MGS2* remains a landmark and an aspiration. While *MGS3* and *MGS4* are both dazzling postmodern visions in the same vein, *Sons Of Liberty* is arguably the most excitingly loopy of them all. So as a tiny tribute, my phone now rings with *MGS2*'s codec sound. That way, whenever some tedious bureaucrat calls wanting me to give them money, I can at least enjoy an exciting moment of wondering whether Iroquois Pliskin is about to warn me of explosive peril.

Steven Poole is the author of Trigger Happy: The Inner Life Of Videogames. Visit him online at www.stevenpoole.net



marshdavies.com



LEIGH ALEXANDER

Level head

Fond recollections of what made us start gaming are what keep many devs and journalists in the industry

Those of us that grew up with gaming have enjoyed the distinct privilege of seeing a medium advance and explode largely only during our own lifetimes, and even a small window of time – a handful of years – evidences enormous progress.

It takes a special kind of devotion to have grown up into an adult gamer, a commitment to keeping pace with a hobby that generally grows ever more complex and expensive to enjoy. We've weathered old age's judgmental attitude and the misconceptions of friends – most of us know that dedication to dragging others 'in' with us, since gaming is something we deeply want to share. It takes even more devotion to become a game developer, to excel in a profession that many, many people have dreamed of since childhood. A career in development asks much in return for the reward of a dream fulfilled. Advancement can be difficult, the studio economy is often whimsical, and years of long hours and intense focus are often the price of just one game. I'm often asked if I'd ever want to go into development myself, as many game journalists often eventually do, and I can't imagine saying yes – after having seen that world up close, I've learned I'd never survive!

The fact I have few applicable skills aside, sometimes it's tempting – at least in concept – since games journalism is its own gruelling arena. I field scores of emails regularly from writers wondering how to get started; there are innumerable fansites where folks write thanklessly and unpaid, hoping to be noticed or hired by the big sites, even to be paid to write a review or two. And the work is a minefield, with the constant tense dance with marketing and PR on one side – and on the other, a demanding readership that's always ready to turn into an angry mob. Publications, even those that have become long-running institutions, can die quickly and with little warning. That there's always someone young and hungry who wants to take your work, and probably can, doesn't make it a comfortable or lucrative career.

> We learned the power of this medium in ways we'll never forget, and that still motivate us

But serious fans, writers and devs alike all stick with it even against their respective unusual odds. That's true passion – and I believe one of the main drives that enables people to endure is the power of nostalgia. When we were kids, games fascinated, inspired and intrigued us, acting as windows into other worlds. Simple bits, line art and softly glowing green text were the scaffolding we fleshed out with our imaginations. Every single one of us has at least one story about how a game saved a summer, created bonds between friends, between parent and child. We learned the power of this medium in ways we'll never forget, and that still motivate us today.

It comes as no surprise, then, that nostalgia and gaming culture have always gone hand in hand: we cling to the memories that taught us to love gaming, and may often find ourselves using our hard-won platforms to try to recapture the pure feeling we had back before our careers began to ask so much of us. We often see teams of professional developers who might have played together if they'd known each other back then, pooling their creative resources to try to develop the kind of games they would have been eager for. The press is known to love titles that capture the familiar, *Zelda*-like magic of discovery, or that ask us to sketch maps, write down clues and use our heads like the adventure games of old. One of the great things about the indie dev community is how consistently it finds ways to reappropriate and reinvent classic forms and styles, favouring traditional aesthetics and arcade-style difficulty levels.

I've written before on how I feel nostalgia culture, which tends to drive a kind of secret vocabulary, can be detrimental to the evolution of a broad and diverse game industry. Instead of (consciously or otherwise) forever chasing our childhoods, it'd be great to see games that strive further toward what modern adults – even those unfamiliar with gaming – might find permanent and meaningful.

It's this latter element we're still learning to be good at, as much of what passes as 'adult' today is really teen boy stuff. Many of us would love to see games break out and grow up. But nostalgia has also been good for modern videogames in ways that deserve acknowledgment. I recently wrote about how many games of the '90s – especially those grievous 'live-action' adventure games – struggled because they were too ready to sacrifice what's really great about games as a medium on the altar of more 'realism' or 'maturity'.

Change is good, and when new consoles come, there'll likely be overwhelming opportunities to reach new heights of what developers are able to achieve with games. Hopefully, in terms of themes and aesthetics, there'll even be some advancement on that maturity front I'm always going on about. Yet just as many genres have had to go back to basics in order to rediscover and mobilise their audiences, a communally felt and deeply understood lifelong language – nostalgia culture – will keep us anchored, remembering what's quintessential about gaming even in the face of significant advancement and change. That's a great thing.

Leigh Alexander is a widely published writer on the business, design and culture of videogames and social media



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BRIAN HOWE

You're Playing It Wrong

Spoony Bard accepts his Spike Video Game Award for Japanese to English translation in games…

From the telecast of the Spike Video Game Awards, hosted by Samuel L Jackson – December 7, 2012.

"And the Lifetime Mutha-[beep] Achievement Award For Videogame Translation goes to… Well, [beep] me in the [beeeeee-bee-beeeep]. It's Spoony Bard!"

[Tentative applause]

"Oh my God, a winner is me? Hesitate a minute, somebody set up us the microphone… Thanks you to a large extent. I'll be Francis: this is especially grateful because I haven't gotten much vocation since the '80s and '90s, when I one-handedly creatored English text translations for classics you all mounted up on, such are *NES Pro Wrestling*, *Metal Gear Solid*, *Ghostbusters*, *Ghosts 'n Goblins*, *Double Dragon*, *The Legend Of Zelda*, *Final Fantasy*, *King Of Fighters*, and so many additional. Including, off-course, *Zero Wing*. Ahem, all your base are belong to us!"

[Thunderous applause]

"Thanks you, thanks you. When I bosomed those seven immortal words into English from Japanese, I had no theory they would smite a chord with so many people a decade later, and I still don't moderately grasp why they did. It wasn't a passage I worked especially obdurate on. I was just challenging to correspond the meanings as translucently as probable. But for whatever basis, it is an enjoyment. To be quoted all over the Intermesh and prized for your eloquent of talking. And as they say in my country, you can't halve a melon with a cuckoo clock, but the watercress salad is the secret. Do you have this saying here?"

[Crickets]

"Well. Now that all your attention are belong to me, I want to yield a few more remarks. First, I have to dedicate this reward to my mother, my numeral one influence, who taught me the fundaments of best translation—keep it literal. Type as fast as your fingers will go. Replace sentences you don't understand with periods, and if a certain word looks wrong, add apostrophe's until it looks realistic. Most of all, she educated me, English is a language of pure mad anarchy with no fixed policies and should be cared for as such. She elapsed away years ago, but right now I can almost listen to her saying, 'Conglaturation, Spoony. You have completed a great career. And proved the justice of our culture.' You're greatest, Mom."

> "I was just challenging to correspond the meanings as translucently as probable"

[Sympathetic cooing]

"This is also for my brothers, Bimmy and Jimmy, who I already salaried compliments to in my *Double Dragon* translation, even though they used to hit me until I would say, 'Ouch! What do you do?' To them I demand, 'Hey, stare upon me now, you dweebenheimers! Ha ha ha.'"

[Raucous hooting]

"And finally, this is for my father, Error Bard, whose footprints I stepped on into the translation commerce. Though he uttered very little English, he managed to translate more than 1,000 Japanese product manuals, providing crucial facts like "Warning: the Semicircle Cover with the up arrow to press the lever OFF and palpate Rubber Plunger on gasket with forefinger at risk of death." I made a worship to him in *The Adventure Of Link*, when he showed the way to the Island Palace just like he showed me… BARF! Oh God, I just got a paper-cut from my remarks here. BARF!"

[Shocked gasps]

"What? I got a paper-cut. 'Barf' is meaning the same thing as 'ouch', correct?"

[Awkward silence; exit music starts up]

"Damned. Maybe this room is an illusion and a trap devisut by Satan, ha ha. Anyway, I never could have sleeped of receiving this honour when mounting up as a young boy on the Engrish Peninsula, a tiny republic situated somewhere ambiguous between Japan and Great Britain. I hope it gets me more vocation, to be Francis with you. I had a terse comeback when I was hired to do *Final Fantasy Tactics: War Of The Lions*, but they didn't replenish my just contract because I retranslated 'Basic Skills' as 'Fundaments'. This is meaning the same thing as 'basic,' correct? Like, you study your fundaments in school?"

[Really awkward silence; Spoony Bard's voice diminishing as he's ushered offstage]

"Well, I have been talking so elongated that you people must be saying, 'I feel asleep!' In closing I want to advise you, be wise and courageour and feel your strength welling. In your body. Go ahead dauntlessly! Make rapid progress! VICTOLY!"

Brian Howe writes about books, games and more for a variety of publications, including Pitchfork and Kill Screen


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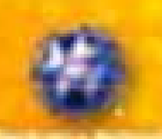
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#245



THE GAMES IN OUR SIGHTS THIS MONTH

The console rut



www.bit.ly/it2QiG
Up-to-the-minute previews and reviews

Feeling bored of videogames? Exhausted by sequels? Craving innovation? Perhaps console gaming is the problem. While *Dead Space 3* (p42) and *Grid 2* (p46) lead the console charge in Hype this month, they're both familiar prospects. Each is polished and oh-so-cautiously willing to slightly toy with its predecessor's values, but these are games built by well-oiled machines for well-oiled, if aging, machines. Compare that with the month's PC offerings and you'll see quite boldly how innovation and experimentation are being harnessed as the driving force behind development on the platform, producing strikingly varied results.

There's the two-man indie team responsible for the moody, bloody top-down '80s homage *Hotline Miami* (p54), for instance, or the community of fans-turned-developers crafting a standalone shooter born from a mod in *Natural Selection 2* (p62), who are tweaking every stat and scenario with the aid of impassioned feedback. Even the more traditionally produced *WOW: Mists Of Pandaria* (p60) and *World Of Warplanes* (p50) seem avant garde by current console development standards: one adds a cuddly new face to a well-worn online world, and the other comes from a stable of hardcore sims built for a niche. Where else could you find such divergent modes of development but on PC, an ecosystem that supports both the MMORPG and the Flash game developer alike? And you'll be able to play *Dead Space 3* and *Grid 2* on one, too.

It didn't always seem this way. In its early stages, a home console cycle can usher in an age of uncertainty and experimentation. But as the generation has dragged on, the industry has contracted, and the bets made by publishers have become safer. Meanwhile, the PC development community has continued to innovate at an ever-accelerating pace. Currently, it's by far the most vibrant, exciting sector in gaming.

MOST WANTED

EscapeVektor Vita
Nnooo's port of its WiiWare hit is a mash-up of *Pac-Man*'s mechanics and *Gridrunner*'s looks. It's the perfect fit for Vita: the sharp neon lines popping to life on its crisp display as you tilt and twist the unit to get a better look at each grid.

Dishonored 360, PC, PS3
The more snippets of Arkane's plan-it-yourself assassin sim we see, the more we want to dive into its meticulous noirish world. It may have the dark heart of a killer beating at its core, but there's a strong sense of humour to recent showings, too. Where else, after all, could you cause death by possessed rat?

Sim City Mac, PC
Finally, a way to solve the fierce debates we get drawn into regarding the merits of tourism-based economies over thriving industrial centres. *Sim City* allows a group of friends to play in the same region, meaning one town's pollution may become their neighbour's problem.


Clarke's more nimble in *Dead Space 3*, but taking down a collection of Necromorphs will still drain your ammo and threaten your health

HYPE

DEAD SPACE 3

A frosty setting promises tension, but is this horror game sacrificing its scares?

Publisher	EA
Developer	Visceral Games
Format	360, PC, PS3
Origin	US
Release	2013







RIGHT **On board spacecraft, the series likes to spring its foes on you up close, ensuring that you'll need to stock up on Stasis energy in order to see them off**

Dead Space has been orbiting The Thing for two games now, so it's little surprise that its third instalment sees the series finally touching down. Isaac Clarke has crash-landed on Tau Volantis, an ice planet whose frozen wastelands will seem familiar to fans of John Carpenter's splatterhouse classic. Aside from offering the sense of a homage coming full circle, it's a location that provides a change of scope for a series that was in danger of getting lost within its own metal-plated corridors and zero-gravity cargo holds.

While EA's horror franchise continues to struggle with generating real scares, *Dead Space 3* at least retains the strong focus on atmosphere and tension: snowstorms offer an ideal means of reducing visibility, while the planet's patchwork installations are cluttered with flapping cables and guide ropes, meaning that you have to be practically on top of them before you can tell if you're approaching a structure or a collection of mutated killers.

For the first time in the series, Clarke's not on his own. *Dead Space 3* introduces a drop-in, drop-out co-op partner in the form of Sgt John Carver. With his face bisected by a ragged scar and a backstory that involves his family being killed by the Necromorphs, he's not the most inspiring of companions from a narrative point of view, perhaps, but his presence will allow players to open up new side quests from time to time, as well as traverse a handful of 'beta' routes that lead through otherwise linear environments.



New weapons are on the way, but the plasma cutter and its ilk remain to offer sharp options for dismemberment – albeit options with dangerously long reloads attached

Carver, along with a little too much radio chatter, also removes the last vestiges of isolation that were powering the best of the series' endearingly creaky creep-show scares. In return, however, he's forced Visceral to up its game as far as pure action's concerned, increasing the size, frequency and ferocity of the monsters and, crucially, improving player mobility when facing them. Both Carver and Clarke are now more nimble than most other survival horror protagonists, able to roll smartly out of danger when cornered, and this makes clever use of the environment as reliable a tactic as walking backwards while reloading. New weapons are promised alongside new foes, of course, and the three-way battle between Clarke and Carver, the Necromorphs and the human Unitologist soldiers seems likely to create some interesting combat dynamics for the design team to then exploit.

Not everything about the series has changed. Perhaps paranoid that fans of the previous instalments will be put off by the muddle of new environments and cast



Afraid of the Clarke

Dead Space 2 might have revealed Isaac Clarke's face to the world, but great character design means the protagonist retains a degree of mystery. With his space helmet combining elements from welders' masks, battleships and even medieval armour, no amount of gruff radio chatter can truly humanise him, while the health meter that accentuates his spinal column reinforces an intriguing sense of vulnerability. New co-op pal Sergeant John Carver benefits from the same attention to detail, and while the presence of another player may diminish the game's ability to scare you, *Dead Space* should maintain its sense of otherness.





John Carver seems like a bit of a bore, but having another player along does mean the design team can build on the sense of scale and challenge. If you play solo, his gruff presence appears in a few cutscenes instead

members, Visceral's eager to provide at least one old-fashioned *Dead Space* sequence, set on yet another derelict space hulk. After the bracing winds of Tau Volantis, this feels mostly familiar – all locked doors, off-screen sound effects and toggle-switch puzzles to work through as Clarke faces the same old monster closets stuffed full of multi-limbed Necromorphs waiting to be strategically dismembered.

There's the odd flash of visual inspiration, though, such as a trip through a frozen science lab that shows a human body presented rather neatly in a series of cross section slides on an autopsy table, and there's even the occasional new idea, too – found most notably in the form of a tiny new Necromorph enemy called the Swarm Infector. A cross between the Swarmer and the Infector, two series stalwarts, these creatures are capable of racing across the environment at speed and reanimating any nearby corpses. It's pleasantly horrible to watch these monsters work, as a puddle of limbs and flesh jerkily transforms itself into the gangly outline of a Slasher. As with the standard Infector, they also add a welcome jolt of menace to the exploration, as you move from one claustrophobic room to the next, eyeing up nearby bodies and wondering when the next one will strike – and how many new foes you'll be facing when it does.

These moments aside, however, the lingering impression is of a supremely competent design team struggling to bring new life to a franchise that may already have reached its zenith. Three games in and *Dead Space* has shown its hand – now it's hunting around for some new cards to play. ■

Q&A
David Woldman
Senior producer
Visceral Games



Dead Space 3 **seems much lither than its forebears – why take this approach when so many games seem to equate scary set-pieces with a limited ability to move?**
We want the player to be fighting Necromorphs that jump out at you from every angle, not their thumbsticks. Some of the gameplay and mechanic additions we've made to the game this year have been to ensure that we give the player everything they need to overcome the game challenges and then feel rewarded.

How have you approached making *Dead Space 3* really frightening?
Fear and terror really live inside the mind of the individual, and our team excels at tapping in to those fears. When creating *Dead Space 3*, we've made sure that all of our sets and designs support common ways to build tension and atmosphere, while introducing all-new ways to keep you on your toes. It really is one of the more fun parts of our design.

Do you come up with lots of Necromorph ideas and scrap most of them?
Our Necromorph creation process is really divided into two different phases: gameplay requirements and visual look and feel. First we focus on what type of gameplay we are trying to achieve by defining what we want this monster to do and how it should behave. Once we get to the point where we understand this, we kick off the visual design. Things like dismemberment points, the profile of the enemy and movement dynamics are all considered during this process. When these two areas of production merge, we start to see the package come together. Then it's a matter of tuning and polish.

Does adding co-op make the game more of a straight-up action adventure?
We wanted to create a uniquely thrilling *Dead Space* co-op game experience without sacrificing the things our fans expect from our franchise. *Dead Space 3* is still very much a *Dead Space* game, built on tension and atmosphere. We've innovated in so many areas that the game will feel fresh and new in singleplayer and in co-op. But we're making a concentrated effort that players feel like they're playing a *Dead Space* game in either mode. The fundamental difference is that in co-op, you will have a friend along the way that you can share the experience with. You will get content and gameplay unique to the new co-op character, John Carver, and will be able to share that terror experience with a friend; very much the same way you would a horror movie.



Lofty cinematic ambitions jar horribly with the toy-like custom liveries. Do those logos have to be super-sized for console to keep the sponsors happy or something?

H Y
P E

GRID 2

Has a four-year pit stop aged Codemasters' grimy, artful racer?

Publisher	Codemasters
Developer	Codemasters
Format	360, PC, PS3
Origin	UK
Release	Summer 2013



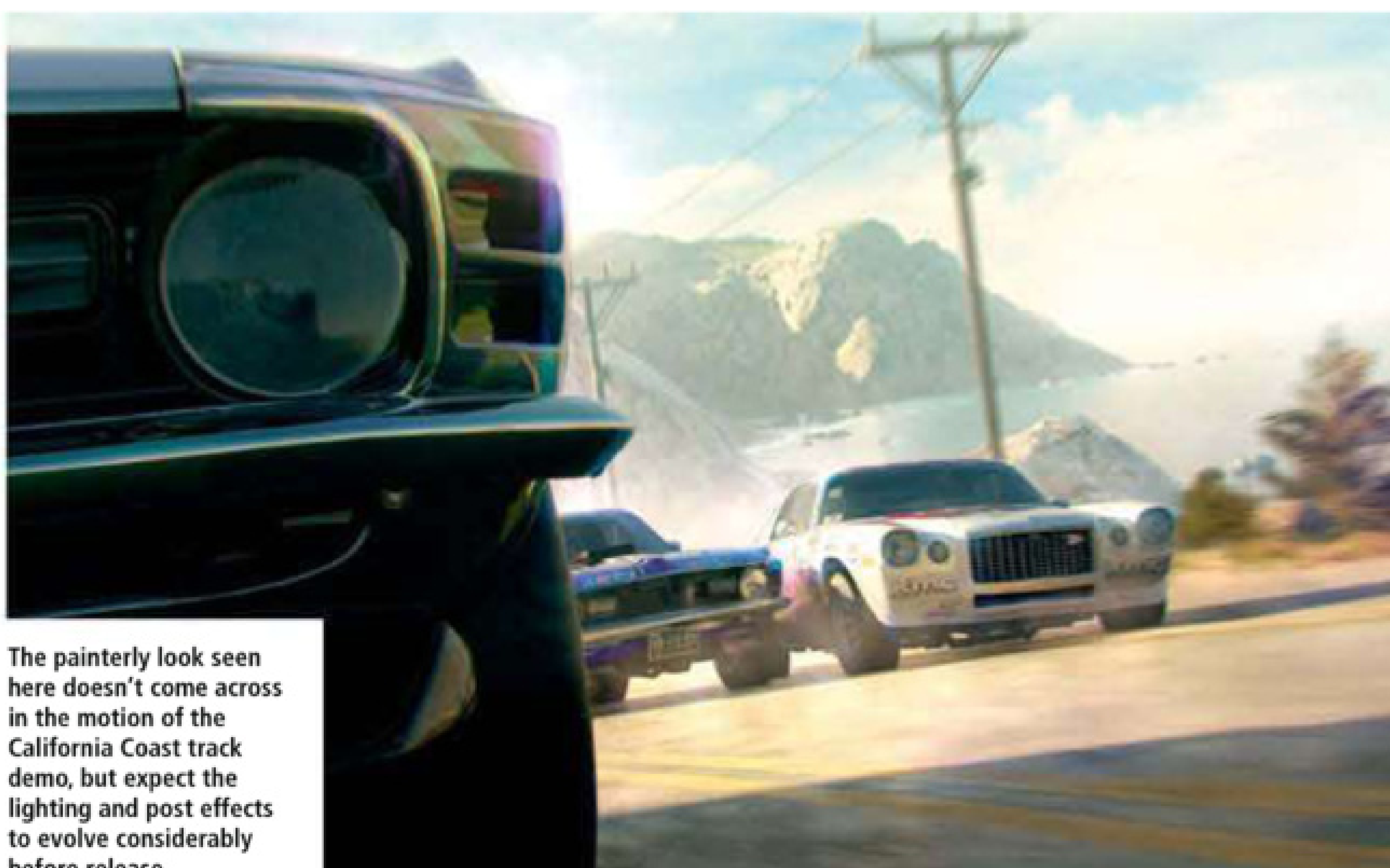
GRID 2



The overwhelming sepia of the first game, much of which was due to consistency problems with the outsourced assets, has been left behind in 2008

The logo for *Grid 2* is the logo for *Grid* with a '2' stuck on the end. Hopefully the artist still had the old Photoshop documents to hand or he'd have been kicking himself. In anything other than the deadly eliminator of modern racing games, it wouldn't even be worth mentioning – but now you're wondering what it means when the proudly progressive Codemasters makes such a linear gesture.

In the four years since *Grid* challenged its genre to embrace its grittier side – revolutionising things somewhat with the ironically lenient 'Flashback' feature – its creator has stayed alive by taking risks. Be quick or be dead; be a reboot, not a sequel. First impressions of *Grid 2*, though, are frustrating. The loyalty and anticipation felt by fans of the first game is such that an event full of platitudes and disclaimers is doomed to disappoint.



The painterly look seen here doesn't come across in the motion of the California Coast track demo, but expect the lighting and post effects to evolve considerably before release

Not that *Grid 2* looks bad on paper, or indeed in Powerpoint. It still talks bigger than most casual driving sims about 'white knuckle' races through 'iconic city streets', pulling 'edge of control' manoeuvres around '90-degree turns' before hopping continents to the homes of 'pure motorsport'. It's off to Paris this time, where 'wide boulevards are juxtaposed with narrow cobbled streets'. Then it's off to Chicago and Yas Marina and a host of other destinations.

It has the cars, too: the lovely BAC Mono joining the Pagani Huayra, Ford Mustang Mach 1, McLaren MP4-12C, and Chevrolet Camaro SS, to name but a few. Its art directors want to shoot them like famous auto photographer Laurent Nivalle and then frame them in the 'stark, tense and disconcerting' style of Michael Mann. And because it's all based on the growling Ego engine, you want to assume that it'll all fall effortlessly into place. When so much of what we're hearing was said to us four years ago, why wouldn't it?

That the first of the day's demos kind of doesn't is forgivable. An anonymous stretch of Californian coast that looks pretty unremarkable next to the DICE-assisted *Need For Speed: Hot Pursuit*, what it's really showing – via the D-Box chair that's now a regular of these events - is the intricacy of the game's real headliner, a handling system called Trufeel. *Grid 2* has no driving assists, you see, just a one-size-fits-all handling model designed to mimic a car's behaviour were you to drive it out of the showroom. It's too early to say if it works, or how the feedback of the 1, 000hz physics simulation through such



Start your engines

Grid 2 has it tough. Not only must it battle the picturesque duo of *Forza Horizon* and *Need For Speed: Most Wanted*, but also the supremely photogenic *Project CARS*. Its weapons include an all-new lighting system, spherical harmonics to bed its cars into the scene and soft shadows to complement its cityscapes. Phew. There's also bokeh depth-of-field and a much stronger grading system: artists can now take diffuse-only renders into Photoshop, grade them manually and then feed the results into Ego. This, combined with an understanding of hyperrealism and negative space, should be more than competitive enough.





Up to 60 attributes give character to the AI drivers, determining such things as how early they'll yield if you hold the racing line in a crunch

expensive hardware will scale down through consumer wheels and a pad. Few, though, would question Codemasters' track record.

The second demo is more revealing. Set in Chicago, it's a PGR-style street race that feels almost like a reprise of *Grid*'s sensational San Francisco opener. Despite the best efforts of Ferris Bueller and The Blues Brothers, the Windy City isn't nearly as iconic as the home of Bullitt, but Codemasters knows its strengths. Urban canyons and gigantic sun shafts are swapped for the raining sparks of the 'L', cars exiting corners to the regular sight of a train coasting past fourth floor windows.

And when you jostle into a tunnel alongside visibly responsive AI, you're treated to what the devs call 'audio reflections' – which in all seriousness do sound better than boring old echoes. There is a depth-of-field to the game's audio, a quite cinematic envelope of noise.

Taken in isolation, they're not demos that really scream 'four years in development' at you. But that, we're assured, is to come thanks to a deliberate separation of offline and online play. Bucking the trend for mingleplayer modes and looking more in *Call Of Duty*'s direction, *Grid 2*'s multiplayer is 'bespoke, tailored to a multiplayer's needs and desires'. We're told it will see Codemasters' RaceNet portal 'rolled out in full', creating a 'push and pull service' – we told you there were Powerpoint slides – that moves *Grid* out of its shell into an involved community.

This is going to be vital, not least because Codemasters does *not* have a great track record when it comes to long-term support and DLC. Without them, its game could look old next to even *Gran Turismo 5*. ■

Q&A

Clive Moody
Executive Producer

Iain Smith
Associate Producer





Why is the branding so unchanged since the first game?

CM: There's a whole host of areas that we are pushing pretty deep with *Grid 2*. It was important to us, with the franchise being away for four years, that we give confidence that the heart and soul of the experience is intact – that the racing experience is absolutely as good as it can be, top of its class. We're building a whole host of interesting elements around that, and we firmly believe it'll make the game a much more immersive experience than we achieved with the first game.

There's something to be said for letting the city design the race. How do you do it?

IS: You've obviously got to get those iconic locations into the track, so we'll look at a top-down view of those areas, and we'll also run different ribbons of track through a track simulator we have. There it's tested to see that if you're flying into an obtuse-angled corner in a particular car, we can see if that's going to be a jarring experience. Is it going to be intuitive for the driver? And we've also got to think about elevation for the track; it's not a two-dimensional thing. Then we go off and start thinking about what the track will be like in design. We come at it from the approach of an actual track designer. If we were race designers having to put this race on in reality, how would we do it?

***Grid* felt a bit 'locked-in' with its absence of a meta experience...**

IS: There's one key thing that we can't talk about that's going to extend the level of believability of that world – we can't talk about it because we are going to deliver that message in a very focused and clear way. It's something that I'm working on quite a lot and that question's precisely what we're trying to answer. But I guess RaceNet is the wrapper for all those different elements. When we're creating the online aspect of the game, we question what experiences we can give that can only be played in that space – whether it's a community thing where everyone fights for the same goal, helping each other to reach it, or taking part in something where you've got a sense of your place in that world and it's tangible.

H | Y
P | E

WORLD OF WARPLANES

High flying, free-to-play dogfights from the creator of *World Of Tanks*

Publisher	Wargaming
Developer	In-house
Format	PC
Origin	Ukraine
Release	2012

World Of Tanks was a freak success. Not even developer Wargaming could predict it setting, and then smashing, its own Guinness World Record for the most players online simultaneously earlier this year. When the game was first released, Wargaming's server engineers spent long nights frantically slotting new blades into burning server farms as the world caught on to the moreish appeal of online, free-to-play, tactical team-based tank warfare.

It's been two years since that mad rush to get *World Of Tanks* working. So where better to go for the sequel than the spiralling dogfights of the golden age of air combat? *World Of Warplanes* sees you collect a hangar full of history's greatest warbirds: from the juddering biplanes of the '30s to the early jets of the Korean War. Each can be fitted with meticulously researched weapons, fuselage designs and livery patterns, then flown into combat against wings of 15 enemy fighters.

Fast, 15-minute deathmatches drive *World Of Warplanes'* economy of upgrades. The rules are simple: two teams spawn mid-flight in opposite corners of a 15x15km map and must obliterate one another, chalking up kills and gathering extra XP. The roster of planes has been carefully chosen to encourage dramatic close-quarter tussles. Heat-seeking missiles would make combat distant and easy, while modern supersonic jets would require maps of titanic scale. *World Of Warplanes'* fighters, then, must blow each other away with old-fashioned torrents of bullets.

Outmanoeuvring an opponent is more important than outright firepower. Planes are bracketed into three classes that lend themselves to different strategies on the battlefield. Lithe dogfighters get close quickly and use superior turning speed to stay out of enemy sights. Heavy fighters can use their superior jets to outrun smaller aircraft and favour long-distance strafing runs – they're airborne snipers capable of hunting light and heavy aircraft from afar.

Wargaming has a team dedicated to finding obscure prototype plane designs

Ground attack planes, meanwhile, offer a more sedate role for those who prefer to avoid the sudden death of *Warplanes'* tight skirmishes. Their job is to roam the map looking for enemy ground troops, boats, AA cannons and tanks to bomb. Blasting these increases the speed at which a team's influence fills a victory bar the top of the screen, enabling teams to win without hunting down every single enemy aircraft. That's no bad thing, since it's easy to fly low and hide among the hills of the huge maps.

Every aircraft within these classes is designed with historical strengths and weaknesses in mind. Indeed, Wargaming has a research team dedicated to finding obscure prototype plane designs. They provide source material and blueprints for artists, and give designers an idea of each model's manoeuvring ability, top speed, turning circle and armour effectiveness.

Wargaming hopes that the class system and varied aircraft will provide the layers of complexity after initial simplicity that have kept *World Of Tanks* players signed up for so long. *Warplanes* needs to be as accessible if it is to achieve similar levels of popularity.

A responsive control scheme is vital, too, presenting a challenge for its networking design that exceeds that of *Tanks*, as lead designer **Ivan Kulbich** explains: "It doesn't matter if you use a mouse, keyboard or joystick, it sends the same data to the server, and the server calculates all the physics."

However good the control scheme, players will need practice to get a feel for how each craft flies. Kulbich says they decided it would be too much to expect players to jump in and instantly barrel roll their way to victory.



World Of Warplanes' swift arena battles are more similar to *Counter-Strike* than *Call Of Duty*: once a plane has been shot down, it's out of the fight. You must retrieve and repair it before reuse



WORLD OF WARPLANES



In current beta versions *World of Warplanes'* battlefields below are fairly static, but that's set to change with future updates. Moving ground targets and animated ground conflicts will make pilots feel as though they're part of a wider battle

"We want a player to start from a tutorial," Kulbich explains. "It's skippable of course, but we will offer experience, and we want to introduce new PvE modes, co-op game modes where you can fight with your friends, or just random strangers, against AI bots."

World Of Warplanes seems especially ambitious considering Wargaming's pedigree as a developer of intricate strategy titles such as *De Bellis Antiquitatis* and *Massive Assault*. *World Of Tanks* marked a successful transition from hex grids and dice rolls to realtime combat on open battlefields, but air combat requires a much greater level of finesse.

Early beta builds suggest it's risen to the challenge. Twitchy controls can't undermine the dizzying thrill of disintegrating a rival's tail while rolling upside-down high above the glittering Pacific. *World Of Warplanes* only has four competitive maps, but they're huge and beautiful, and will become better once cloud cover is added, giving wounded jets and heavy fighters in long range charges a place to hide.

Warplanes is built on the same design philosophies and upgrade systems as *Tanks*, but feels markedly different. It's not meant to slay Wargaming's breakout title, but work with it. *Tanks*, *Warplanes* and the upcoming *World Of Warships* share the same experience and gold system. XP earned shattering mobile artillery in *Tanks* buys upgrades in *Warplanes* and *Warships*, and vice versa. And gold bought with real money buys experience boosters or premium vehicles in all three games.

Wargaming CEO **Victor Kislyi** likened the trilogy to a sumptuous meal, offering a battle for every mood. "We see a guy come home from work, feeling tired and not very agile, play some *Warships* with a glass of beer. But Sunday morning you jump up full of energy and do *Warplanes*, which is fast and 3D, right? And *Tanks* are the usual classical medium, you can play them in your lunch break at work."

Wargaming is a standard bearer in the rising success of free-to-play games. *Warplanes* aims to build on the success of *Tanks* by being an alternative that doesn't undermine the game that propelled the studio to the big time.

"People keep asking 'Aren't you afraid of cannibalisation?'" said Kislyi. "No. Absolutely not. We have three solid games. So if you spend your time in *Tanks*, fine we'll love you, if you stopped playing *Tanks* for a while and played *Warplanes* instead, we'll love you too. And *Warships*? We'll love you."

Will players love them back? Wargaming will find out when *World Of Warplanes* leaves closed beta later this year. ■



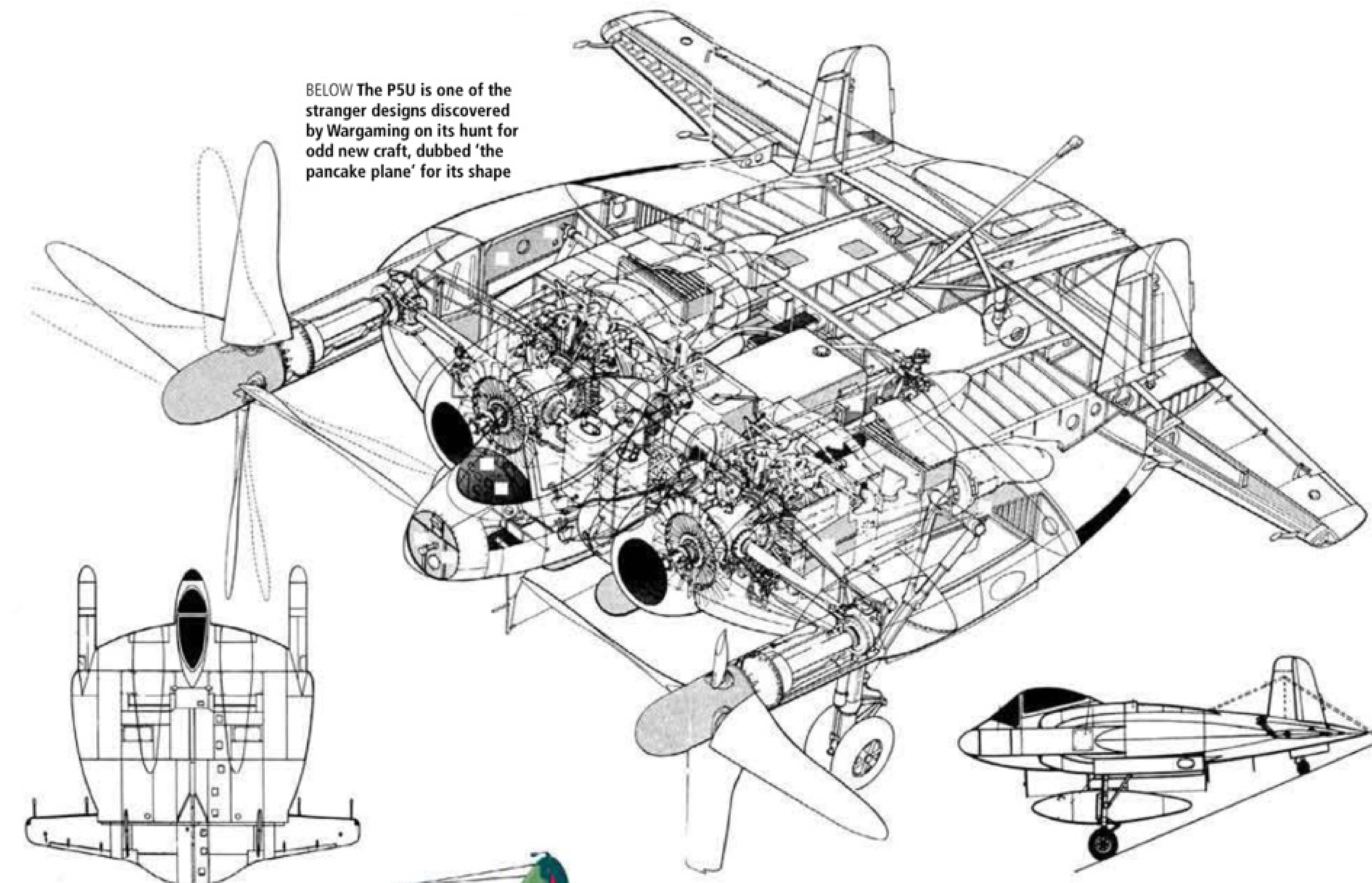
The use of real air combat strategies, such as having a wingman, will stop dogfighters from latching onto your tail, a situation that's almost impossible to escape when flying solo



International warfare

Japanese, American and German aircraft will be available at launch, but other nations will be added in the following months as more planes are added. Teams aren't separated by nationality, though. Every 15-plane squad can be made up of a combination of any plane, and there's a matchmaking system in place that should hopefully avoid unfair fights that pit biplanes against advanced fighter jets. *World Of Tanks* has benefited enormously from regular updates that have added new maps and game modes. Wargaming is planning to provide similar support for *World Of Warplanes* and, eventually, *World Of Warships*.

BELOW The P5U is one of the stranger designs discovered by Wargaming on its hunt for odd new craft, dubbed 'the pancake plane' for its shape







Design showcase

Wargaming understands that collecting aircraft will appeal to players, and has gone to great lengths to lace every plane with finely researched detail



LEFT Upgrades to each plane, from any country, result in some subtle visual changes, which will accurately reflect real variations that existed historically. For example, an armour upgrade might introduce a new cockpit, a slightly different set of landing gear, or an alternative nose design, based on blueprints the team has tracked down



ABOVE There are two ways to tell which class a plane belongs to: its size, and the number of engines it has. Single engine craft can win any fight at close quarters while, multi-engine craft with wide wingspans make great bombers and long range attack contenders

H | Y
P | E

HOTLINE MIAMI

To live and retry in LA: the retro revival gets ultraviolent

Publisher	Devolver Digital
Developer	Dennaton Games
Format	PC
Origin	Sweden
Release	2012

12/24rnds

Hotline Miami delivers the thrills and gore of a tense action game set-piece through an 8bit filter. Developed by Dennaton Games' two-man team, it's a heady mix of influences old and new, but riffs off the 1980s in particular 





There are a few interludes between all the bloody mayhem, some of which serve to lighten the tone. Conversely, you'll also be given a window on the tale's darker side in brief glimpses of your employers



You'll need to watch for windows. Enemies can spot you through them, which means you'll end up getting sprayed with bullets and shards of glass

Your target is holed up in a gaudy apartment, guarded by armed heavies with itchy trigger fingers and ferocious dogs with empty stomachs. The décor is hideous – the kind of thing that an '80s movie drug baron would pick to complement his white suit. You kick open the front door, knocking down the first thug. His firearm hits the deck, and you dive on top of him, spilling pink brains on a lurid turquoise rug as techno music throbs in your ears. An adjacent door is flung open, two thugs burst in, and you sprint for the firearm. But it's too late. Bang! You're dead – a corpse shrouded by debris.

Developed by Dennaton Games, the two-man team of developer **Jonatan 'Cactus' Söderström** and graphic artist **Dennis Wedin** ('Partners in design'), *Hotline Miami* feels like a demake, fusing contemporary gameplay with old-fashioned forms. It transposes the twitch-based mechanics of modern action and stealth games – think post-millennial *Metal Gear Solid* or *Kane & Lynch* – onto a top-down perspective that recalls *Smash TV*. It also has the enigmatic, brooding narrative of a vintage Suda 51 game. It seems Dennaton isn't afraid to alienate people. "We think there is, or at least should be, an adult audience wanting to play serious games that aren't made to suit everyone's taste," explains Wedin. "There are a lot of games that handle adult themes, but most of them seem to target audiences where the intended age range starts around 16."

In *Hotline Miami*, you guide your masked hitman through short levels that are crammed with gunmen for you to bump off at the behest of your shadowy employers. The controls are simple: you move around with the keyboard keys, while the mouse directs your aim and view, allowing you to manoeuvre carefully around each corner. The left mouse button throws a fist or fires a bullet (though you're dropped into each mission unarmed) and you throw objects with a right-click.

Success requires razor-sharp reflexes and a keen awareness of each environment, learned via trial-and-error. One of the loading screen tips lays out *Hotline Miami*'s philosophy: "Don't be afraid of dying." And die you will. In this world, one hit is enough to kill you, sending you back to the level's beginning with your tail between your legs, your score wiped out, and a lesson hopefully learned. Memorising the patrol patterns of enemies and figuring out whether to sneak cautiously or improvise on the fly adds a tactical layer to what looks like a simple top-down shooter. But you can't simply memorise a winning route, because the formula is shaken up by the enemy weapons being randomly allotted each time. This means stealth killing the guy who once granted you a long-range weapon with which to dispense the next wave of goons might instead leave you vying for your life with a lead pipe or tiny knife.

Your struggle is compounded by the fact that the only equipment offered up at the start of a stage is a mask of your choice. Picking between an elephant and an owl mask is an obscure ask at the moment, but will have a practical purpose in the final game. "The main character uses the masks to disconnect himself from guilt," says Wedin. "As we all know, animals can't be held guilty for their own actions. Gameplay-wise, the masks will alter the player's attributes to a certain extent, from smaller things like walking speed to the possibility of using a unique weapon." It also seems like a nod to both Suda 51's wrestling mask fixation and a standout scene from



Partners in design

Hotline Miami is the brainchild of indie developer Jonatan Söderström (who goes by the alias 'Cactus'), and graphic artist Dennis Wedin. Söderström's output of free indie games is prolific – he's made over 40 – and experimental, covering everything from shooters and racing games to an "erotic space adventure with a deep moral message". Söderström and Wedin previously teamed up for *Keyboard Drumset Fucking Werewolf*, a heavenly slice of *WarioWare*-esque madness that fuses Söderström's penchant for reaction-based play with Wedin's vibrant visuals as you guide an Eskimo-werewolf through a gamut of bizarre minigames.

ABOVE **Wedin says inspiration was found in 1980s action movies, which "may not always have gotten it spot on with special effects and all that, but they at least had balls when it came to finishing off shady characters in gruesome ways that made you cringe"**



www.bit.ly/MlVYPd
Screenshot gallery

another of the game's key inspirations: Nicolas Winding Refn's cult-hit movie Drive.

Drive is by no means the only filmic influence on *Hotline Miami*. There are shades of Michael Mann's seminal Miami Vice series in the explosions of violence. Reminders of the man-against-the-world neo-noir of To Live And Die In LA are triggered by the close, colourful settings. And in *Hotline Miami*'s use of subtly tilting in-game perspective ("This is actually the first game I've worked on that I've tried to give a somewhat drug-inspired presentation. We felt it was appropriate," says Söderström), there are overtones of the warped, unsettling worlds and angles of golden age Brian De Palma films. The use of perspective, however, also throws up a potential weak spot. Your viewpoint – a mid-range bird's-eye view – is too restrictive to give you the advantage, and means plenty of brushes with instant death thanks to an offscreen enemies with better eyes on the field.

Hotline Miami doubtlessly does a lot with a little when it comes to style; the challenge now is in ensuring the game's overall structure is as richly rewarding as its visual language. The sense of narcotics-induced mania certainly helps elevate it from a competent stealth-action hybrid to something more memorable. And there are some inspired moments that diverge from the game's core formula – a blurry hospital escape, for example. At this stage, however, it's difficult to see the replay incentives once you've solved the puzzle presented by each gauntlet of rooms, although there is the potential for variation in the mask system. Either way, *Hotline Miami* looks like a trip that's worth undertaking at least once. ■



RIGHT ***Skulls Of The Shogun*'s stylistic influences include Toei Animation's 1963 film Wanpaku Oji No Orochi Taiji and the work of Disney concept artist and illustrator Mary Blair**



BELOW **The campaign is full of irreverent humour – samurai hurl insults across the battlefield and weather unwelcome visits from mad Shinto deities**





H Y
P E

SKULLS OF THE SHOGUN

The sun rises on a fast strategy game that's sure to challenge your cranium

Publisher	17-Bit
Developer	In-house
Format	360, PC, Surface, Windows Phone
Origin	US
Release	Autumn 2012



Kazdal's take on Japanese culture is partly informed by the five years he spent at Sega in Tokyo. After *Skulls* is done, he plans to relocate to Japan once again



www.bit.ly/Pmegw3
Screenshot gallery

Units can power up by munching on the skulls of defeated foes, but plunging into enemy ranks without support will mean certain defeat

Throughout the history of videogames, we've been treated to myriad different visions of Japan, from clean and futuristic to dark and grimy, and rendered in everything from pixellated sprites to bold brushstrokes. That's why it's all the more surprising that *Skulls Of The Shogun*, a turn-based strategy game heading to 360, Windows 8, Surface tablets and Windows Phone this year, is able to evoke our traditional ideas of Japan while doing so in an entirely new way.

With a look inspired by the squat, compact builds and bold colours of cartoon and anime characters from the '60s and '70s, the game's skeletal soldiers almost leap off the screen, irrepressibly colourful in look and language.

"Simple sharp shapes, sharp lines, real small feet and big torsos... we wanted something that would read when zoomed far away, and I love that mid-century funky illustration style," says **Jake Kazdal**, founder of indie developer 17-Bit, the game's director, and its chief artist and animator. "It's a look I've always wanted to spend more time with."

And Kazdal talks about bringing an "arcade aesthetic" to *Skulls* as well. In his words, that means, "It's simple, it's immediate, but there's a ton of depth in there, too."

The feeling of punchiness and exuberance doesn't stop there, but trickles down into the gameplay. *Skulls Of The Shogun* draws inspiration from Intelligent Systems' *Advance Wars*, but there's no trace of that game's tile-based map design. When you select a unit, a circle appears around it, and it can be quickly moved to any point within that circumference. The basic relationship between the small handful of unit types is easy enough to grasp: soldiers absorb damage but aren't particularly mobile, archers are deadly at distance but defenceless up close, and horsemen have the advantage of a large movement circle but possess only average attack and defence.

Presiding over each team of clattering skeletal samurai is a general who's both the most powerful unit and biggest weakness on each team, given his death means instant defeat. Generals are powerful enough to turn the tide of battle on their own, but one who rushes in foolhardily will be overwhelmed.

Defeated units leave skulls on the ground, which can be gobbled up by members of the opposing side, restoring health and upgrading abilities. A general who's eaten three skulls transforms into a demon, literally and figuratively, with two actions every turn instead of one – a tremendous bonus in a game that ordinarily restricts each side to five actions per turn in total.

The strategic depth sounds promising, but Kazdal also wants to emphasise *Skulls'* accessibility: "We put a lot of effort into visual communication. You should be able to figure it out without looking at pages of stats and data." Characters react contextually when the player is contemplating a move – enemies will raise their weapon if they are preparing to counterattack, or will cower in fear if they can't. Hit points are cleverly represented in the design of each unit's flag.

These and other touches of artistic detail are possible partly because the title was delayed to add new multiplayer features (see 'Head in the cloud'), but they're also a reflection of a certain obsessive perfectionism on the part of Kazdal, who describes himself as a "crazy art guy" with tongue only partially in cheek. *Skulls Of The Shogun* may well fill the light strategy void left by titles like *Advance Wars* or *Shining Force*, but a few moments with it is all that's needed to see that it's also a labour of love. ■



Head in the cloud

Part of the reason *Skulls Of The Shogun* was delayed earlier this year was so that developer 17-Bit could include an asynchronous multiplayer mode called Skulls Anywhere. In this mode, players trade turns across three platforms – 360, Windows 8 desktops and tablets, and Windows Phone devices. *Skulls* allows players to begin a match with friends on an Xbox at home, then continue later on a Windows phone or a Surface tablet, where it looks and plays exactly as it does on the bigger screen. Is multiscreen cloud-based gaming a trend or a fad? Kazdal believes the former: "I think this'll be a lot more common in the future," he says.

HYPE

WOW: MISTS OF PANDARIA

Kung fu pandas and Pokémon invade Azeroth

Publisher Activision Blizzard
Developer Blizzard Entertainment
Format Mac, PC
Origin US
Release September 25



www.bit.ly/O8n0GP
Screenshot gallery

In the beta, the new Monk class (right) doesn't get interesting until you're awarded specialisations at level ten. Until then, you're only given the mundane Jab and Roll. Complete the start quests and you'll choose which faction to side with

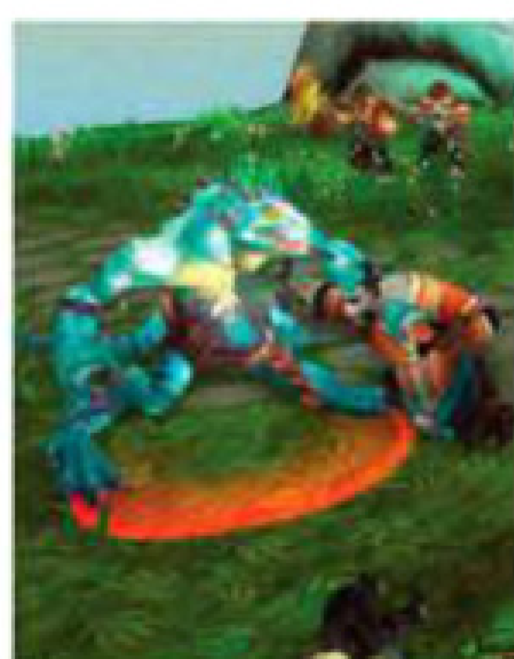
Azeroth faces its harshest trial yet. Having repelled the extraterrestrial demonic threat of the Burning Legion, journeyed north to destroy the massed undead ranks of the Scourge and seen their lands torn asunder by a giant dragon bursting from deep beneath them, the proud Alliance and resolute Horde must next question their very identity. With subscriptions to the MMOG that once ruled all others having fallen over a million from 10.2m in the second quarter of 2012, *World Of Warcraft* faces a crisis. Embattled by callow free-to-play newcomers, burgeoning alternative genres like the MOBA, and simple old age, *WOW* might still be the largest subscription MMOG in the world, but it must fight to the death for a share of the attention the market is lavishing on younger games.

It's not an new problem, of course. But Blizzard's attempt to make the game new again by tearing up its map in *Cataclysm*, released in December 2010, didn't quite work. Old hands criticised it for offering too little in the way of new content for top-level play – the raids and daily quests that have kept *WOW*'s guilds buzzing for years. And as for new hands – well, there's little evidence that it attracted the rafts of new players that it needed to make up for losses elsewhere.

The Pandaren's starting area, the Wandering Isle, is perched atop the shell of a giant sea turtle, which has been wandering increasingly erratically of late. It's time to find out why

And so Blizzard has turned east for solutions in *WOW*'s fourth expansion. *Mists Of Pandaria* adds a new continent to the world map, a new class, the Monk, and a new playable race. A race of pandas cut off from the rest of Azeroth until now, Pandaren have been part of *Warcraft* mythos for years, but still don't seem a natural fit for an existing set of races and settings that, while hardly original in and of themselves, felt broadly coherent within its own fantasy. Now, though, *WOW* is being asked to absorb a raft of traditional eastern cultural cliches: pagodas, mystical martial arts and rice fields. The Pandaren themselves enjoy superb animation, but it's sadly seemingly been spent on emulating the belly- and jowl-wobbing gait of Kung Fu Panda, a film which rather defines this vision of the fabled east.

If uninspired, the animation is still one of many expressions of Blizzard's perfected MMOG craft. The Pandaren's punchy first ten levels excel at stunning reveals as you pass into another of the starting zone's beautiful locations, and are designed to ensure you rarely need to backtrack. *WOW* has never looked or played more invitingly, even if its creaking fundamental structure and engine show through now and then. There are the 'kill ten monkeys' and 'give me five sparkling macguffins' quests, of course, but there are also scenarios which see you transformed into a frog to collect reeds from under the beaks of marauding storks, or defeating student martial artists while balancing on upended logs, Karate Kid-style. You're never in the same place for longer than a few quests before it's on to the next sight.



Adventure time

Blizzard seems to have looked to newer big MMOGs for some inspiration as to how to extend *WOW*'s traditional gameplay, adding Scenarios, PvE group challenges which are similar to *Warhammer Online: Age Of Reckoning*'s Skirmishes. Scenarios might sit in instances rather than the world itself, but they're story-driven, having you, for instance, defend NPCs in a dramatic storm as they brew a powerful concoction, escort them to a temple and then use the brew to defeat a boss. You'll earn gear and Valor Points for your trouble, and the Dungeon Finder will be expanded with the option to look for available Scenarios.

The new Monk class, open to most other races as well as the Pandaren, is highly flexible and dynamic. With the choice to play as a tank (Brewmaster), healer (Mistweaver) or damage-dealer (Windwalker), it struggles to differentiate itself in terms of role with existing classes, and errs dangerously close to the likes of the shapeshifting Shaman. But its Chi system makes it play closer to a Rogue, filling four Chi slots with certain standard melee skills which you can spend on special moves that expand your strategy. At least at low levels, it's active and free-flowing, neatly mirroring its martial arts inspiration.

Elsewhere, Blizzard has looked to the east for decidedly more surprising ideas: Pokémon. Pets now have function outside decoration – you'll be able to take them into turn-based battle with those of other players and NPCs. You'll hunt for them too, with 100 to find spread across the entire world, and they'll level up with use. Alongside Pandaria's Dreamworks stylings, they perhaps give a sense of where Blizzard sees *WOW*'s future: younger players. If veterans are finally tiring of *WOW*'s fantastically long endgame, maybe it's time to pitch it younger. It's one way to inject new life into the old dog, but who knows whether a new generation will even understand the concept of subscriptions. ■

H | Y
P | E

NATURAL SELECTION II

This sequel to an ambitious FPS-RTS hybrid has an even leaner form



Publisher	Unknown Worlds Entertainment
Developer	In-house
Format	PC
Origin	US
Release	2012





The marines' conventional firearms feel weighty, while, at range, aliens make do with projectile vomit

ABOVE **As Commander, you're at the helm of the entire team, barking out orders, setting waypoints and coordinating attacks. The interface is simple and intuitive, letting the action take centre stage**





www.bit.ly/ONNUEU
Screenshot gallery

Each of the alien classes has a distinct personality and feel. Our standout is the Skulk, a speedy little creature that can stick to walls and ceilings, and can leap great distances to deliver a killer chomp

The first *Natural Selection*, a multiplayer FPS-RTS hybrid mod for *Half-Life*, was the passion project of one man, Charlie Cleveland. The result was a spiritual successor to Rebellion's *Aliens Vs Predator* – pitting human marines against the scuttling alien Kharaa – with a dash of *Command & Conquer*. For the sequel, Cleveland's helming an eight-strong development team, mostly recruited from the community, in a cosy office in California. The game has evolved away from its bedroom mod roots in other ways, too, and now boasts a proprietary engine.

The original's RTS elements remain, however, with one player on each team able to take the role of Commander from an in-game station. They'll view the map from above, place support structures and traps, and issue orders to manage their team's expansion. The rest of the squad is left to focus on the firstperson action, with the forces on the ground helping their team expand across the intimate maps and harvest more resources to spend on better guns or more powerful forms.

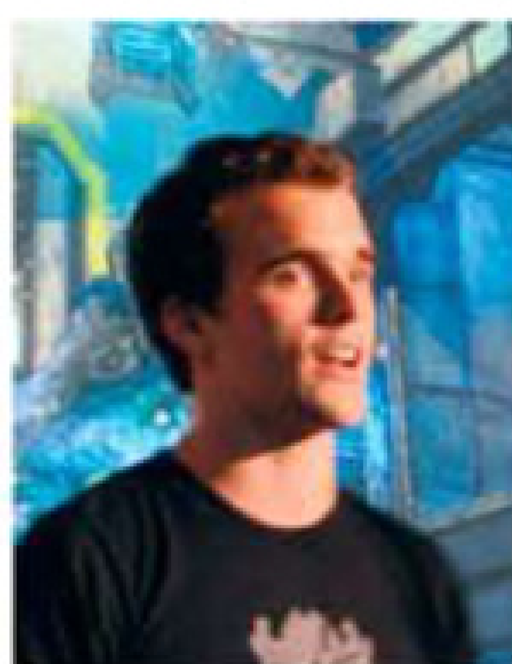
Marines are best suited to long-distance encounters and are defined by the gear they've accrued, such as mines, jetpacks and flamethrowers. The aliens, meanwhile, are usually adapted for close-quarters scraps, evolving from speedy Skulks to hulking Onos, and refined by buying perk-like upgrades to create different builds. There's interplay between the various equipment and forms, too, discouraging one-note teams.

Matches can take anything from 15 minutes to an hour, and see the teams play tug of war with land and resources before ganging up to raze the opposing command centre. In its rhythm and strategic slant there's a feel of a MOBA here, and patches of bright, bubbly visuals remind us of *StarCraft*.

Our first few matches in the well-populated beta overwhelm as our Commander barks orders, directing us to specific map areas and delicately plotting the team's rise to power with timed strikes on enemy resources. Learning the maps, then, is crucial, and you'll find yourself consulting the map overlay often as you sprint to waypoints marked out by your Commander. Having the voice of another player telling you what to do initially feels patronising, but it soon becomes apparent that success is elusive without a leader planting turrets and tracking the match.

The game's fine balance of action and RTS elements is no doubt the result of the design team's passion for the original *Natural Selection* template, but it's also very much down the series' fanbase. The developers have been actively seeking the recommendations, feedback, and input of the community since the game was announced in 2006. They've purchased and been gifted a number of mods directly from the community, too, such as an advanced spectator HUD to help fuel a drive in the e-sport space. The official release looks to just be the beginning, though, offering owners the full source code and tools with which to mould *Natural Selection II* into whatever form they like. It's a bold move, and one that could offer the opportunity for users to relive Cleveland's own dream journey from hobbyist modder to full-time developer.

Natural Selection II, then, is more ambitious and robust than its predecessor, offering kinetic combat and a refined RTS element that shouldn't scare newcomers. The beta feels fully formed, if also currently the home of plenty of bugs, and seems to indicate that this game could be that rare breed: a sequel that satisfies the faithful while converting the uninitiated. ■



Fan service

Hugh Jeremy is one of Unknown Worlds' most recent hires. He was working as an accountant in 2011, but the team spotted his passion for *Natural Selection* and plucked him from the community to operate as the studio's one-man PR machine. Jeremy says post-launch support is a big part of the plan: "The first project after release of *Natural Selection II* is *Natural Selection II*. We'll continue patching it, maybe monthly, after release. We've got features we've wanted to put into version one, but we can't. Units, maps – it's all in the pipeline, already developed, but it'll have to wait 'till after release."



CALL OF DUTY: BLACK OPS II

Publisher Activision | **Developer** Treyarch | **Format** 360, PC, PS3 | **Origin** US | **Release** November



With a script penned by movie scribe David S Goyer and the eerie industrial tones of Nine Inch Nails star Trent Reznor, *Black Ops II* is certainly offering a step up in production values, even by *COD* standards. But it's the multiplayer, of course, where the game's longterm prospects are truly to be found. With a trailer that hints at a greater focus on e-sports (perhaps integrated with the COD Elite portal), and its futuristic setting allowing for all kinds of gimmicky tech and novel perks to be distributed across the character progression trees, *Black Ops II* might well become the king of the *Modern Warfare* hill.

DMC: DEVIL MAY CRY

Publisher Capcom | **Developer** Ninja Theory
Format 360, PS3 | **Origin** UK | **Release** January



The latest glimpses of Dante in Ninja Theory's controversial adventure (he's still a brunette, naysayers – do you expect him to dye?) look more like scenes from *Inversion*'s anti-grav showdowns than Capcom's own oeuvre of demon-slaying fare. Still, the enemy designs show off Ninja Theory's artistic flair and, despite the 30fps cap, our hands-on time with it suggests *DMC* manages to retain the series' combo-crazy substance regardless of its altered style.

ANIMAL CROSSING

Publisher Nintendo | **Developer** In-house
Format 3DS | **Origin** Japan | **Release** TBC



Even if this wasn't a series made for StreetPass, the promise of a gardening store, a shopping mall to lose yourself in, an expanded museum and the opportunity to take on the role of mayor would be enough. Nintendo is confirming everything bar the release date for 3DS's first taste of the 'simple' life.

GUILD01

Publisher Level-5 | **Developer** Various
Format 3DS | **Origin** Japan | **Release** Out now (Japan), TBC



This compilation of a shooter, weapon-crafting RPG, airport management game and 'visual novel'-style RPG brought together some of the Japan's brightest development stars, including Goichi Suda. And now a western release seems likely, with English trademarks filed and a sequel confirmed.

WARFRAME

Publisher Digital Extremes | **Developer** In-house
Format PC | **Origin** Canada | **Release** Winter



A free-to-play thirdperson actioner from the studio behind *The Darkness II*, our first look reveals a fast-paced sci-fi shooter with gorgeous visuals. The perspective and characters channel Digital Extremes' *Dark Sector*, while the action looks like a mix of elaborate ranged and close-quarters combat.

JOE DANGER 2: THE MOVIE

Publisher Hello Games | **Developer** In-house
Format 360, PS3 | **Origin** UK | **Release** 2012



Hello Games is treating its sequel like a summer blockbuster, cramming in jetpacks, ski slopes, minecarts and unicycles alongside Joe's trusty motorcycle. These extra ingredients should lead to a new focus on constructing your own devious levels in the editor, and ensure a more varied singleplayer.

KNOCK-KNOCK

Publisher Ice-Pick Lodge | **Developer** In-house
Format PC | **Origin** Russia | **Release** TBA



The bizarre minds behind *Pathologic* have turned their eye for the creepy towards a slightly more accessible premise. *Knock-Knock* is a macabre game of hide-and-seek that also asks you to construct barricades and make use of random item drops to survive nights in a house besieged by nightmarish 'guests'.

INSURGENCY 2

Publisher New World Interactive | **Developer** In-house
Format PC | **Origin** US | **Release** TBA



A standalone sequel to a project that first emerged on the mod scene, *Insurgency 2* is a fast-paced tactical shooter. More deliberate than *COD* and *Battlefield*, but by no means slower, its realistic weapon handling and punchy bullets should give a different feel to its objective-based gametypes.

FTL: FASTER THAN LIGHT

Publisher TBC | **Developer** Justin Ma, Matthew Davis
Format PC | **Origin** China | **Release** September



FTL: Faster Than Light is self-described as a "spaceship simulation real-time Roguelike-like". On a broad scale, its pair of developers hope to offer the tactical type of space combat seen in Star Trek, rather Star Wars-style dogfights. *FTL* does this by offering you the captain's chair and tasking you with diverting power, directing crew to trouble spots and maintaining shields in battle. Outside combat, you'll be charged with managing the happiness level of your crew.

RISE OF THE TRIAD

Publisher Apogee | **Developer** Interceptor | **Format** PC | **Origin** US | **Release** 2012



After mod-team-turned-developer Interceptor seemingly landed the official sanction to remake *Duke Nukem 3D*, that project has stalled for reasons unknown. So it has instead turned its attention to making this update of the beloved, uber-violent 1995 Apogee shooter. The team is taking the templates of the original levels, but apparently sees this as very much a reboot rather than straight remake, and promises the game's out there humour will make the crossover intact. It's also making its version fully moddable, so you'll be able to craft your own levels in which to unleash the ridiculous powers of the bizarre Excalibat.

Format 360, PC, PS3
Publisher Ubisoft
Developer In-house (Montreal)
Release October 2012



W O R L D   O R D E R

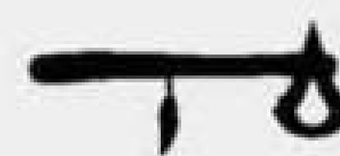
How Ubisoft Montreal is tackling one of the most ambitious projects of its generation

A*ssassin's Creed III* is the biggest game that Ubisoft, one of the world's biggest game publishers, has ever attempted. That alone should convey everything you need to know about the scale of its ambition. At its conclusion, the project's development cycle will have spanned three years. Roughly 600 members of Ubisoft Montreal's staff will have worked on it, supported by numerous other Ubisoft studios around the world, including Quebec City, Bucharest and Singapore.

Over 5,000 unique animations have been created for the new assassin protagonist Connor Kenway alone, which would take over an hour to watch if viewed in sequence. Shifting the series' setting to the American Revolutionary War meant the character team needed to build approximately 120 new crowd NPCs, just to ensure that it looked like the right century. The game boasts 145 brand new design features, each of which has an exhaustive sign-off document detailing how it should function in the game. Topping all this off is a muscular new proprietary game engine dubbed AnvilNext.

Yet in spite of the slew of high-profile releases from other studios slipping to 2013, *ACIII* will hit shelves at the end of October, which is precisely the target Ubisoft chiselled out at the very outset of preproduction.

Walking through the so-called 'Assassin's floor' during a recent visit to Ubisoft Montreal – surveying the vast expanse of desks, computer monitors and determined faces – it's hard not to allow the sheer implausibility of the whole undertaking to leave us nursing a sudden bout of vertigo. How do you make one of the most ambitious games of this generation? That's precisely the question we came to Montreal to answer.



The process of shipping any sufficiently advanced videogame is indistinguishable from magic. And you'll even hear this kind of language from some of the magicians conjuring the voodoo. When we ask **Francois Pelland**, *ACIII*'s senior producer, how the project's countless threads get braided



Connor-concealing stalking zones are a major new feature. Players will also be able to use droppings or markings on trees to track and hunt two dozen different species of animal

OVER 5,000 UNIQUE ANIMATIONS HAVE BEEN CREATED FOR NEW ASSASSIN CONNOR KENWAY ALONE

together in order to ship the game on time, instead of talking about milestones and production pipelines, he indulges in a more metaphysical explanation.

"There have been a lot of discussions in the past," says Pelland, "where people have been saying, you know, there's this magic on an *AC* production. At some point we were saying, 'This is weird. It's that magic!' And it's really amazing. I have seen it a couple of times with the first playable prototype, or the end of preproduction, or the E3 build. Things converge right on the day. You leave at night at 11pm saying it's going to be tough, and the next day you look at things and something's happened. There's something that happened in the past few hours.... When you say, 'All right, this is it. It's time to crunch. It's time to put everything in,' the velocity of this team, and the result you get is phenomenal."

But even the most confounding of magic tricks has a mechanical explanation. And although it's perhaps less romantic, the incremental journey to completing *Assassin's Creed III* is little less remarkable.



In January 2010, **Alex Hutchinson** joined Ubisoft as the creative director of *ACIII*. He and a core team of about 20 engineers and designers sat down to begin high-level discussions about what shape the game would take. *Assassin's Creed II* had just shipped and the feedback was overwhelmingly positive, but everybody knew they had to push forward into unexplored territory.

"You know you can't ship the same thing over and over again," says Hutchinson, reflecting on this moment. "So we had this weird problem of the company saying, 'Change everything, but keep it exactly the same.' We had to find that sweet spot between refreshing the brand and changing it so much that it isn't *Assassin's Creed* any more."

Marc-Antoine Lussier, *ACIII*'s lead design technical director, points out that *Assassin's Creed: Brotherhood* was beginning development at roughly the same time, but had a different mandate due to its shorter development timeline. "*Brotherhood* was a much more direct iteration on *ACII*," he says. "Their guideline was: 'Don't reinvent too much. Use everything we know, and use the fact that we know how it works to make it even better, but faster.' Whereas our challenge was to reinvent everything, if possible."

After two games set in mostly arid locales, the *ACIII* team knew it wanted to refresh the environment by exploring snow and wooded terrain. So, at the project's earliest stages, the team's veteran engineers were off in a corner figuring out how to work with snow. Given the other constraints of wanting to set the game in a historic moment with plenty of action and political intrigue, one that hadn't already been done to death in games, the American Revolution setting emerged around this same period as an elegant fit to the team's various criteria.

Only one high-level question mark remained: who would the newest assassin be? Once the team had settled on the American Revolution as a setting, it knew it wanted the game's hero to exist outside of the conflict. The prospect of having a protagonist with mixed English and Native American heritage seemed like a convincing choice on many levels. Who could be better suited to traversing the frontier wilderness than an indigenous hero? Furthermore, the identity tensions and dramatic potential in such a background, blended with *Assassin's Creed*'s cultural sensitivity, could help him stand proud in an industry dominated by muscle-bound, gun-waving NRA members.



If the wildness of the American frontier proved difficult for the colonists to subdue, the challenge was also daunting for Ubisoft Montreal's artists, designers and engineers. Building a forest would defy nearly all of their existing competencies and require a solid year of research and development. The previous two games in the *Assassin's* series had centred on the sane, orderly grids of urban centres, which the designers could build with reusable blocks from an object bank by copying, pasting, rotating and setting in place just so.

MAN OF THE CLOTH

Painstaking effort went into making sure new assassin Connor Kenway didn't merely feel like a rehash of either Ezio or Altaïr. In addition to the expansive suite of new behaviour animations, *ACIII* art director The Chinh Ngo obsessed over details as subtle as the type of fabric on Kenway's tunic. "If you look at the cloth," says Ngo, "it's solid, rigid, stronger. It's not a nice velvet coating like Ezio's, or like Altaïr, where it's just a piece of cloth that's soft and fluid. [Connor's] is more rigid, more military and brutal. It's really about the weather and the roughness. One of the main goals is to make him different, because people get tired of the same [thing]."

Q & A MARC-ANTOINE LUSSIER

Lead design technical director, *Assassin's Creed III*



What improvements does the AnvilNext engine bring, and what will most impress players?
There's no longer a single move of Connor's that is purely animation. There is some procedural magic going on at all times. It might be a new [movement] for the feet, banking of the whole body on uneven terrain, or blending ten animations at a time added to the upper body just while you're running or walking. All tiny details, but the result in the game is that no matter how fluid you thought the first assassins were, this one is just amazing.

What about in terms of the game's AI?
In the crowd, there are a lot more characters onscreen, especially at a distance. That was needed for battlefields, so we had to develop something where we could render between 1,000 and 2,000 NPCs at once. The NPCs in *ACIII* perform a lot more activities than they used to. People used to just stand around or walk around aimlessly in previous games. We have stations in the world now where people will either spawn to do a job, or do something, or they get attracted to a fountain to go and drink. They also interact with each other, so we can add rules, like when a single man crosses paths with a single woman they look at each other or wave. If an old grandpa comes across a child, there's a unique interaction.

There doesn't seem to be much recycled content from past games in *ACIII*.
That was the vision… If we could, we would change everything; nothing would stay the same. No animation, no sound, no bits of HUD or menus. Even what's iconic to the brand, we wanted at least to refresh it. So far, I think we've been pretty successful. Even iconic animations like the leap of faith, or the way Ezio and Altaïr used to jump, we've introduced a lot more variety into those animations.



bit.ly/N0OCIX
More on the making of *Assassin's Creed III*

"For the forest, our first realisation was we [couldn't] do that!" says Lussier. "You can't plant trees in a straight line, well divided, and think it's going to look like a forest. We had to [do some] R&D [asking ourselves], 'How do you build, efficiently, a forest that looks good, that feels organic, that you can still climb around and jump from tree to tree?' It's got to be functional and artistically pretty. That was an insane challenge."

The first solution the team tried was a procedural one, setting parameters for the distance between trees, the number and angle of branches, and so on, and then asking the computer to do the planting. After a couple of months of trying to make this approach work, a few of the studio's most talented artists were asked if they could make 100 square metres of forest as pretty as they possibly could. A week later, the job was done and the result was infinitely more attractive than the procedural solution. From that point on, the team dropped the procedural approach and went for a brute force solution with many artists. *ACIII*'s art director, **The Chinh Ngo**, compares the process to placing individual flowers in a bouquet and making sure it looks attractive from all angles.

Ubisoft Montreal has grown accustomed to creating dazzling architectural set-pieces, but the wooded frontier posed it a new challenge. The landmarks of the New World would need to be waterfalls, cliffs and imposing vegetation. And it would be even more vital to get these elements right, since the outposts of the American colonies were unavoidably lacklustre in comparison to the grandeur of Renaissance Italy that *ACII* captured. The city of Philadelphia was originally set to be included, but was later cut because it was too flat and visually unremarkable at the relevant point in history.

"One of the big constraints on the art side," says Ngo, "is that when you compare with the European cities, you realise the [colonial] architecture is new, very young, without history. It's very simple, which means boring. When you look at a street in Constantinople versus a street in Boston, it's not the same."

The art team compensated for this deficiency by striving to enrich these places with unprecedented detail. By way of example, Ngo references the irregular dimensions of wooden window frames due to their warping in the sun. The team also tried to convey the maritime character of Boston by creating a sense of wetness via a bluer colour grading, and puddles of water here and there. And the artists employ sleight of hand tricks, drawing focus away from the buildings to the streets, where they have taken great pains to heighten the visual interest and the sense of dynamic bustle.

Hutchinson notes that the cities in *ACIII* are the most historically accurate that have been built in the series to date. They're 1:3 scale, and based on actual urban plans and topography provided by consultant historians. While demoing the Boston map, Hutchinson morphs into an enthusiastic tour guide, pointing out the original statehouse where the Boston Massacre occurred. And Beacon Hill looms in the distance, which was plundered to create landfill in the bay, since Boston was originally only connected to the mainland by a single land bridge.

Writer **Matt Turner** mentions the work of historical consultants, who have helped correct artistic licence in etchings from the period. "They would say to us, 'Yeah, this is a pretty etching of a Boston street on a fall day in 1778, but you'll notice that there are no poor people and no animals, and it's a very empty street. That's not how it was. It's the artist trying to portray the city [in a favourable light]."

"If we ship *Assassin's Creed* only with cities, it's not enough," says Ngo. "It's not nice, it's not big, so we need to bring other areas – the wilderness, that's one thing. And even the naval [combat]. By having the frontier, by having the naval, then I feel more comfortable to ship the game."

Ngo is referring to sequences that find Connor setting out on the high seas, where players will get to engage in rousing naval battles atop a simulated ocean. Next to the frontier wilds, the ocean sequences were such a challenging design problem that Ubisoft's Singapore studio was entrusted with bringing the concept to fruition. Having had an opportunity to play one of the naval sequences during our visit, it's safe to say that it's one of the most riveting experiences we've had in an *Assassin's Creed* game to date, especially the sensation of the ocean roiling beneath you as a storm settles overhead. Since there's far less to render in these scenes, more than half of the console's power can be devoted to simply making the ocean as alive as possible.

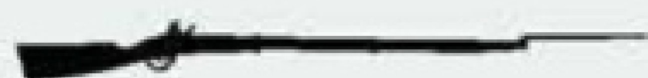




You can now scoop up weapons from the ground and perform assassinations without breaking your stride. "Our goal was to have a character who is always in motion," says Hutchinson. "Someone who is unstoppable if you're playing correctly"

"WE DON'T REALLY KNOW IF IT WILL WORK, BUT WE TRUST THE TALENT. [SUCCESS] DOES NOT COME WITH AVERAGING EVERYTHING"

When we ask Ubisoft Montreal studio director **Yannis Mallat** if he's concerned about the ever-mounting levels of financial investment required by triple-A games, he points to the culture of risk-taking evident in this naval sequence as a means of ensuring that the enthusiasm around games such as *Assassin's Creed III* can justify the marketing and development spends. "Singapore was totally committed on [perfecting the game's naval combat]," he says. "But still it was a risk. It was a risk at the time from the brand, [and] from the studio to say, 'Hey we're going to do that.' And we don't really know if it will work or not, but we trust the talent, we trust them. [Success] does not come with averaging everything. Not at all."



Building a compelling videogame world is a key part of the equation, but it remains merely one part. You can have the most pristine wooded frontier ever seen in a game, the most accurate historical cities ever achieved, and the most fantastically unruly oceans ever to be rendered, but players demand to be given interesting things to do in each gameplay space. In order to satisfy this desire, conception workshops on key issues progressed throughout the duration of 2010 as the team plotted the base story arc, talked about key moments and mapped out how it wanted to redefine the core *Assassin's* gameplay pillars of fight, navigation and social stealth. It also discussed what big new features to include, such as the naval sequence that it wanted to prototype.

In order to brainstorm potential gameplay innovations for the game, Ubisoft Montreal hosted an eight-week programme called 50 New Things. One day a week during this window, all *ACIII* team members were free to work on any idea they felt would complement the game. They were invited to self-recruit from within the team to build their own mini-teams, and a host of useful ideas emerged as a result. Hutchinson describes that first year of development as a shrinking box. At the outset, anything can go in the box and management refrained from scheduling the team's efforts too rigidly, provided that their ideas fitted within the confines of the American Revolution, a Native American







Senior producer Francois Pelland (top) and creative director Alex Hutchinson (above) worked together previously at EA Montreal



"WE'RE THE LAST OF THE DINOSAURS. THERE ARE FEWER AND FEWER OF THESE GAMES BEING MADE"

MILES BETTER

Many critics have been frustrated by the momentum-breaking sequences involving Desmond Miles in the present day. Will *ACIII* react to that? "We've built this guy up over the course of the games," says Alex Hutchinson. "And I really believe that we can pay that off, then in retrospect he'll be terrific. I don't think anyone liked Luke Skywalker in A New Hope, but by the end of his character arc this journey that he goes through makes him amazing. So we're really trying to pay off the investment of the people who've been with the franchise since *AC*. In *ACIII*, we catch you up on where he's been pretty quickly, and it absolutely works as a standalone game, but the full payoff will be for those who've been with us since the start."



Lead game designer Steven Masters has also worked on *Rainbow Six: Vegas* and the *Splinter Cell* series since joining Ubisoft in '05

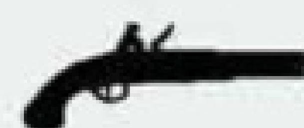
hero, forests, and period Boston and New York. As things progress, that box shrinks and the focus becomes line-item tasks and edits.

For instance, how do you make *ACIII*'s combat function on rocky, uneven surfaces such as the frontier? "This is a big videogame no-no; you just don't do it," Hutchinson sighs. "If you think of *Batman*, or other great games of that sort, they have their navigation sections and then beautifully flat squares on which to do fighting, because it's a pain in the butt." It's a subtle but meaningful innovation that required extensive prototyping.

For a project of this scope, how do you capture and make sense of 145 accumulated new gameplay features so they can be effectively implemented? *ACIII* lead gameplay designer **Steven Masters** describes a process called feature sign-off. At the outset, he'll begin with high-level creative briefs for each feature in the game. From them, he'll develop an actual features list, which is then ranked and distributed to the various teams – behaviour, AI, fight team, mission team and so on – who will be responsible for developing and prototyping each feature.

Each one of these features then gets its own documentation, which is organised into a series of user-verifiable statements. These statements not only help guide the designers but can be easily converted into playtesting documents, avoiding having to draw up a second testing document. The Excel docs live on the studio's public intranet and can be assessed at any time to get either a broad view of the team's goals or a micro view of how each feature ought to perform.

"We've taken away a lot of the philosophising," explains Masters. "I've worked on games where I had a design bible. It was a 300-page ringbound manual, and you just slapped it on a desk and said 'Make that.' And maintaining it was a nightmare, changing it was just horrific, [and] getting people to read it was terrible. Our feature sign-off process, on the other hand, is user-verifiable. So when I pick it up, I'm able to go through and check each one of these items and say, 'OK, does it behave as stated in here?' So we write those in consultation with the people who are going to be building and using it."



The *ACIII* team had its official kick-off meeting in December 2010, where it presented the structure of the game as well as various prototypes and target movies to Ubisoft's executive staff in France. Of course it received the green light to proceed.

From there, the studio continued working on the core gameplay of the new navigation system, the new combat system and various other design ideas. It started roughing out Boston and the frontier to test *ACIII*'s gameplay spaces, all of which culminated in presenting the first playable prototype of the new mechanics in the new environments in June 2011.

From there, it was time to ramp up into full production. The majority of the art team joined, along with more engineers and mission designers, and work began in earnest on building the game itself. Around May to June of this year, the team began editing the game as well as finishing it, making sure any loose ends could be tied off or removed, and that the game would be cohesive for its end of October release date.

"We're the last of the dinosaurs," says Hutchinson. "We're still the monster triple-A game with very large teams [and] multiple studios helping out on different bits. There are fewer and fewer of these games being made, especially as the middle has fallen out.

"We really felt like this was a rare opportunity. We had an experienced team, who had worked on the franchise for a while; we had the full backing of Ubisoft to make something huge; we had almost three years to do it, which is a rarity these days; the tech and the hardware platforms were both mature, which allowed us to start running instead of building base features; and the installed user base for all platforms is massive. Many of these factors are about to change, by choice or circumstance, so a lot of us truly believed this was a once in a career opportunity." ■





LEFT ***Assassin's Creed III*** **dominates several floors of Ubisoft Montreal's converted textile factory headquarters. Even with a UK rep accompanying us, we managed to get lost on one occasion and had to interrupt a developer to beg for directions**

BELOW **The game's naval combat was prototyped in Montreal as far back as January 2010, but fleshed out by Ubisoft's Singapore studio. "We had two guys building little boxes going up and down on waves three years ago," says Hutchinson of the feature's evolution**

F A L L E N

Certain games we've featured on our cover never saw release, victim to what some call 'the curse of **Edge**'. But what really happened next?

S T A R S

IF YOU BELIEVE WHAT YOU READ ON THE NET, *WARDEVIL* DESERVES TO BE MENTIONED ALONGSIDE INFINIUM LABS' PHANTOM CONSOLE IN THE LIST OF GAMING'S MOST NOTORIOUS VAPOURWARE

W A R D E V I L

Publisher Ignition **Developer** Digi-Guys **Format** 360, PS3

YOU WANT TO be optimistic when writing a preview. Given the horrors of developing any new franchise, especially in the UK, a shot in the arm is better than a smack in the face. Were we duped by Digi-Guys? If you believe what you read on the Internet – an almost-credible rant by a supposed former investor, for one, or the vandalism of the project's Wikipedia page – then *WarDevil* deserves mention alongside Infinium Labs' Phantom console in the list of gaming's most notorious vapourware. But of course it's not that simple. Villainy and chronic mismanagement are often confused, and no one we've approached has suggested the latter. Then again, no one's agreed to go on record, either.

When we saw this nebulous game/movie at its home in Pinewood Studios back in **E**207, there was little of it to speak of. Desks were lined with animators; motion capture data was being piped from a facility downstairs; and the company's CV consisted primarily of TV idents, pop promos and CG ephemera. Founder Andy Whitehurst was full of ideas that technically made sense and creatively weren't very good. We generously compared *WarDevil* with a grandiose B-calibre space opera.

The hero was a swashbuckling blend of Kratos from *God Of War* and Voldo from *Soul Calibur*. His nemesis, called simply The General, wore higher-res textures than we'd ever seen on a console. The dialogue, whether printed in the screenplay or published in trailers, was cringeworthy. Target platforms at that point were 360 and PS3, Whitehurst keen to stress the huge untapped potential of the latter despite everything we've come to learn since. The 1080p, 60fps PS3 game with Blu-ray movie sidecar is just a fiction spun from Sony's own dubious forecasts.

It was enough to secure plenty of funding from Digi-Guys' eventual parent company UTV, the Indian media giant with close ties to Disney. With no evidence of actual game development whatsoever beyond an unconvincing combat demo, though, it was no surprise to see the project fall into limbo, Whitehurst depart, the studio get rebranded into Ignition London, and *WarDevil* be reinvented as *Project Kane*. References to Unreal Engine 3 and CryEngine would start appearing on people's CVs, but the studio was shuttered in September 2010.

A studio staffed almost entirely by CG engineers and artists, Digi-Guys was great at churning out cinematics, concept art, and a compelling realtime rendering demo for the first Xbox; it wasn't so great at emails or phone calls, though, as those investigating *WarDevil* have discovered. The vandalised Wikipedia page can be revisited upon request and slanderous forum posts are still around online, but the originals were taken down after legal threats. We've spoken to one insider off the record and it wasn't terrifically revealing, although it's alleged the game's management was indeed in cloud cuckoo land – or somewhere in the vicinity. If the saga of *WarDevil* tells us anything, it's that games pitched largely on the promises of console manufacturers should be treated with caution by consumers and investors. If it sounds too good to be true…





E207, November 2009

A I O N G U A R D

Publisher N/A **Developer** Avalanche Studios **Format** 360, PS3

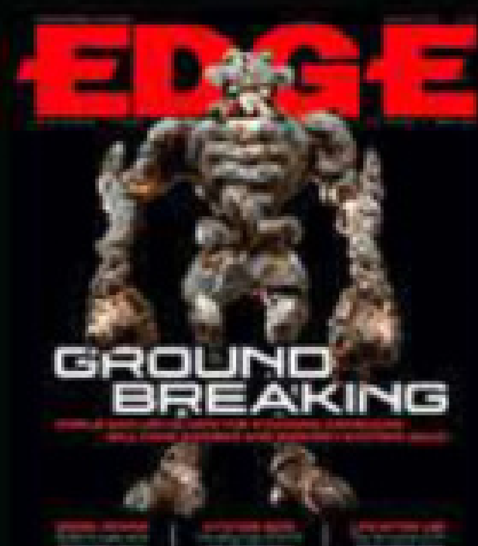
"A MELTING POT of science fiction, steampunk, technology, fascism, mystery and games from the excellent *Panzer Dragoon Orta* to the failed experiment of *Lair*," declared **E**198's unveiling of *AionGuard*, a dizzying open world from the creator of *Just Cause*. "If this is fantasy, it's a gloriously broad strata." Taking its lead from the masters of sprawling epochal fantasy – Michael Moorcock, Robert E Howard, Frank Herbert and Tolkien were just some of the names dropped – *AionGuard* was supposed to slay the lazy tropes that evolved from their works. Orcs and elves would make way for magical golems, exotic mounts, and a narrative that did more than bookend the occasional quest.

The ideas just kept coming, and getting bigger: icy shrapnel from frozen soldiers exploding across battlefields; AI scaling to direct hundreds of troops into combat; drama to rival the rescue of Helm's Deep by the Riders of Rohan. All this from a game that had danced around publisher anxieties for years already, styled upon World War One one minute and hard sci-fi the next. That it still sounds too good – too *much* – to be true doesn't seem to bother **Christofer Sundberg**, Avalanche's CEO, in the slightest.

"This whole industry has been poisoned by NDAs and keeping things in the shade and, to be perfectly honest, not that many ideas are unique enough to keep secret," he insists. "So we figured, 'What the hell, let's just show everyone what we're working on and see what happens. We're a studio that can be really self-confident, as we really have something unique, and dare to make design decisions that very few developers in the world do.' If it wasn't for the massive recession that started in 2008, I'm confident the game would have been out by now – one way or another. It was an interesting experiment and I don't regret it; it didn't hurt the studio or the IP at all."

Sundberg concedes that *Skyrim* – but only *Skyrim* – has pulled off the kind of scale that *AionGuard* promised. Why such a short list? Is it something about the genre, or the mixing of genres that sandbox games present? "Many publishers and developers have a hard time mixing genres," he says. "It's really the world, gameplay and player autonomy that are important to Avalanche, not the setting. I've actually been in meetings with publishers where we've been discussing the percentage of driving players do in our game, and the publisher was trying to put a definition on the game based on the time spent driving. My argument was obviously that if the player chose to fly, does our game suddenly turn into a flight game?"

Did *AionGuard* alienate publishers? According to Sundberg, far from it. "The possibilities around it have just grown and grown over the years, and it is so funny to talk to the publishers who rejected the game, especially after the **Edge** article, who are now begging us to present it to them again. As the studio's currently running on full capacity, we're only loosely discussing the future of *AionGuard*. The business model behind the game won't be a standard mission-based game; [it could be] F2P, PvP multiplayer, or something else – that remains to be seen."



E198, February 2009



EXO

Publisher Infogrames **Developer** Particle Systems **Format** PS2

***EXO* COULD HAVE** been a great many things. But a great game? Sadly, there was just never enough of it for anyone to tell. A squad-based shooter with *Halo*-esque ambitions, it came to **E**98's cover feature armed with dazzling CG predictions of what PlayStation 2 could achieve. As developer Particle Systems would discover, though, the capabilities of Sony's console were far from predictable.

According to co-founder **Glyn Williams**, now head of Igloo Digital Arts, "the goal was to do a kind of anime-esque shooter inspired by things like Ghost In The Shell, with mechs and power armour and all that coolness, which hadn't really been executed well in games. We had this big list of extremely ambitious technical and gameplay targets that we wanted to do with the fancy new PS2. So we dialled the ambition meter to 11 and designed the game prior to ever even seeing a PS2. A lot of the technical targets are now commonplace with Xbox 360 and PS3 – HDR lighting and very mobile, fluid environments – but were probably, to be honest, a little overambitious for PS2, which wasn't the console we thought it was going to be."

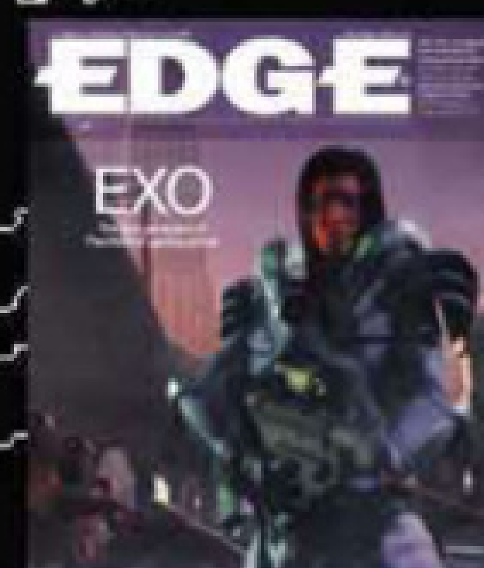
"The libraries at that stage were quite primitive," agrees co-founder **Michael Wong-Powell**, today chief of CG cinematics studio Xenon. "It took so long to get a prototype working – I think that's what caused a loss of confidence. It was quite an investment for Infogrames at the time, and they lost confidence just as we were starting to get going…"

"It killed me how long it took us to just get a triangle on screen," says Williams. "That was a complete eye-opener, because we were PC guys, and with PCs there's an abundance of APIs and methods. Even with consoles nowadays you can get something going in a couple of hours. That wasn't the case, and we had to iterate and iterate just the polygon drawing. We'd do something and just get an appalling framerate. We moved increasingly towards these exotic rendering methods like DMA, where the CPU in the PlayStation didn't touch the data, you just queued it up and stuffed it into the graphics chip. Each iteration was really painful, and we did the dumbest thing: trying to build an engine in parallel to building a game."

Infogrames, we're told, was obsessed with the movie industry at this point and "thought they could sell it like a feature film", says Williams. Particle produced one of the first all-CG game teasers – a curvy, shiny robot tank – and published target renders of a day-lit futuristic city. Behind the scenes, though, the visual troubles were joined by anxieties over the game's AI. Williams continues: "The idea was that the player could hop from squad member to squad member, so rather than change weapons you'd always be in the most fun character. We got that stuff going, but it wasn't easy to use repeatedly in every scenario."

Particle was acquired by Argonaut, but the IP remained with Infogrames, which complicated its development beyond the point of repair. "I don't think publishers have much patience for what is a prototyping model," laments Wong-Powell. "They wanted us to write the whole game down on paper. It's never been like that for games."





E98, June 2001

U N I T Y

Publisher N/A **Developer** Llamasoft/Lionhead **Format** GameCube

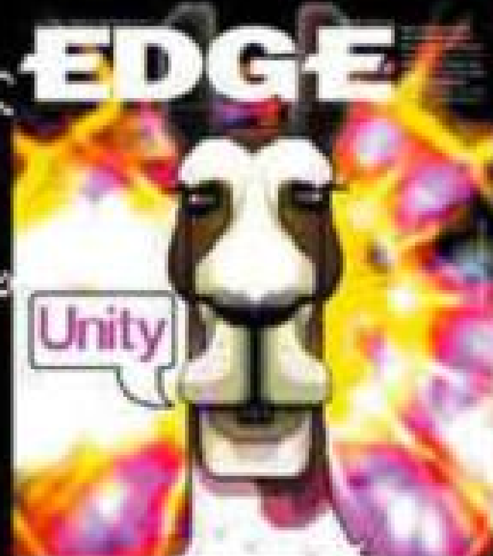
THERE'S A CERTAIN irony to the fact the game that came closest of all of these to release, Jeff Minter's synaesthetic head-trip *Unity*, did so by breaking apart. It doesn't take a handful of magic mushrooms to see its twin components: a *Tempest*-flavoured shooter and one of Minter's prolific Virtual Light Machines, as used in *Space Giraffe* and the 360's music visualiser. **Pete Hawley** is a producer and veteran of Reflections, Sony, EA, and most importantly Lionhead. It was there, as "the 16th member, and really the first producer Peter [Molyneux] allowed in the building", that Minter appeared back on his radar.

"I just sort of realised that Jeff was trying to do something," Hawley begins. "I think he was bitching about the business and that he couldn't make console games, and that no one would give him a chance. I was chatting to Molyneux one day and said, 'Look, Minter's out here.' Peter was a big fan of his work anyway. I said, 'Let's pay him a reasonable salary and make a game with him.' And because Peter's Peter, he said, 'Cool, that sounds like a great idea.' So we figured out the key ideas around the game, which is a VLM component but ultimately a shooter.

"What happened in the end is that I was his chief sponsor and I left [to help form Media Molecule's relationship with Sony]; that's a very common thing in the game business. Even at a big company like Sony or EA, if your sponsor – the guy who found you – leaves, you look around for friends and it's really tough sometimes. I know Jeff carried on for quite some time but, obviously, Microsoft's closeness to Lionhead was increasing back then. Their view of Lionhead as a company – what they'd like to make with them and fund in the longterm – *Unity* didn't really fit in with that. So I guess Microsoft took the view of, 'Well, we'll publish this as a VLM, because it looks kind of awesome,' and Jeff was let loose to develop. Thank God smartphones came along."

Splitting *Unity* into two ostensibly familiar Xbox products has deprived us of a game that might possibly have been more than just the sum of those parts. Driving this home is the news that the mysterious musician attached – albeit tentatively – to the project was none other than sonic alchemist Aphex Twin. Hawley recalls how "at the time, Alex Evans [future founder of Media Molecule] and I were very close friends. He wrote a piece of audiovisual software in his bedroom and he showed it to me one day, and I was like, 'Dude, this is amazing. Why are you just projecting it onto your fucking bedroom wall?'

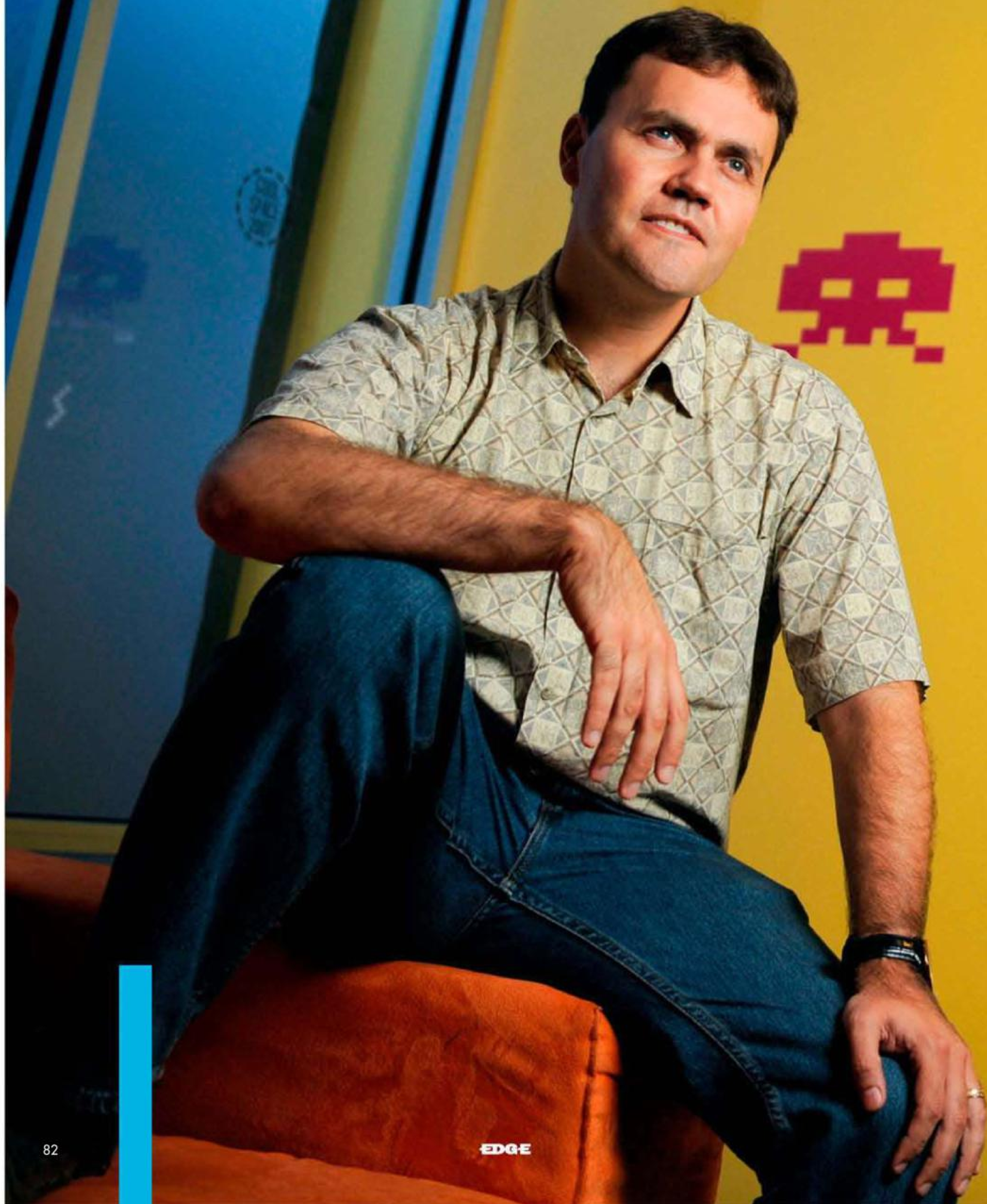
"So I called up Warp Records, because we were into Aphex Twin, Squarepusher, Plaid and all the usual stuff. Long story short, we ended up going on this two-year journey in our spare time doing synchronised visuals with Warp. This was while *Unity* was going on. Obviously, with Jeff's interest in VLM and what Alex was doing, if we could get this awesome soundtrack for *Unity*, that was the missing piece. *Unity* was definitely going to be a stunning audio-driven experience, and I don't mean like *Rez* – it was way more procedural than that." ■



E120, February 2003



THERE'S A CERTAIN IRONY TO THE FACT THE GAME THAT CAME CLOSEST OF ALL OF THESE TO RELEASE, JEFF MINTER'S SYNAESTHETIC HEAD-TRIP *UNITY*, DID SO BY BREAKING APART



AN AUDIENCE WITH...

JESSE SCHELL

The professor, game designer and former Imagineer on how the 'gamepocalypse' he once heralded has begun to play out

"In the DICE talk I painted a which people are driven by such breadth in what we

When **Jesse Schell** delivered his vision of a hyper-gamified future at DICE 2010, he shone a light on the extent to which videogames can insinuate themselves into every aspect of life. In his future, cereal packets would award 20 points when you filled your bowl and buses would grant points from government schemes to encourage use of public transport. Schell called it the 'gamepocalypse', and he attracted the admiration of a generation of marketers and the ire of a generation of gamers. As videogames have continued their rapid evolution, we ask him where the gamepocalypse is today, and about the changing role of the game designer.



CV

Now the head of Schell Games and a professor at Carnegie Mellon University's Entertainment Center, Jesse Schell was previously an Imagineer at Disney, designing theme park rides and its MMOG, *Toontown Online*. After a successful Kickstarter push in January, Schell Games has just launched a new title, *Puzzle Clubhouse*.

Why did that talk touch such a nerve?

I think a lot of things were coming together. We'd seen this massive growth in gamer culture, the penetration of smartphones into people's lives, and the rise of Facebook gaming, which was important because it made us all understand that we don't actually know what we're doing. That *FarmVille* was a surprise really pointed to the fact that we really don't know why people enjoy the things they do. Minds were in a state of questioning, and I put some pieces together and jumped ahead. It was the right time and right place. I had no idea at the time, but that's how it worked out.

Were you pleased with the talk as you prepared it?

Oh no! I wrote it on the plane on the way to the conference, and I put the images together the night before. The main factor for me was total sheer terror, because DICE is kind of a big deal. It's a small conference, but it's got all the influential people in the game industry there. Just to be asked to speak was a big deal, right? It's me and then it's Bobby Kotick. So I was scared to death, because giving a bad talk could be really career-limiting. I had no idea whether they would care, no idea whether they'd like it, and no idea that it might have the potential to go viral. I was just focused on 250 people in this room and I didn't want to look like a jackass.

What happened next?

It's funny, I still have a lot of people come up to me saying, 'Hey, I started my company because of your talk'. And all I can think is, 'Oh man, don't blame me'. It's certainly got me a lot of visibility; a tremendous number of projects started to come my way because our studio might be the one to work on them. I think the talk helped accelerate people's thinking about these topics a little bit. It was a flashpoint, and I was lucky to be there to strike the match.

What did you think about the reactions to the talk?

Some people were so enthusiastic about the notion, and others were utterly horrified. Many people assumed I felt one way or the other – against it or a giant proponent of it. Honestly, I left it all very vague because the talk was designed to be provocative and get people thinking. If you come up and say, 'Hey, there's this real problem,' then people will often acknowledge the issue but feel that you're some sort of expert and will take care of it so they don't have to. If instead you say, 'Hey there's this really horrible situation and I think it's awesome!' then people have to think. It was engineered that way and it seems to have succeeded.

Where you worried about any of the enthusiasm with which some of its ideas have been taken up?

Making games is hard, so I know people are looking for easy answers to their marketing problems or whatever, and I wasn't really worried about that, because they'll learn about it the hard way. I was excited that people started to talk about it; their first thoughts were kind of naïve, but that's necessary. People have to learn and find their way.

Has what's happened since surprised you?

I guess one of the things I didn't foresee is that there are lot of people who are looking into taking these things into the workplace. The key factor seems to be that if the work's pretty boring to do and easily monitored, like in call centres, it does seem that adding game mechanics can sweeten it.

Are there any factors hindering the gamepocalypse?

It's crazy that we still don't have good connection between the retail environment and games. If I go to a car website and do a couple of web searches on a Mini Cooper, I'm going to be inundated with ads for Mini Coopers, and when you go to the grocery store, it tracks everything you buy through store

picture of a world in rewards. But there's find truly rewarding"



cards and sends custom coupons based on what you're interested in. There's no reason we couldn't do things like buy a pack of Coke and get 1,000 gold in *World Of Warcraft* – but the databases just haven't been connected together well enough. You can now use American Express points to purchase stuff in Zynga games, so it's starting, but it's slow.

Why so slow?
Imagine how embarrassed you'd be if you were American Express and you'd made a deal with some game that tanked. It's partly security, but these things are going to get worked out. Zynga and Walmart: that would be easy to imagine. All it'd take is for someone to do this well, and we'll see more.

Since your talk we've seen the rise of free-to-play games.
People always forget how much the business model affects a medium. The shape of what we engage with is largely determined by what people are willing to pay for. TV is what it is because of commercials, and it wasn't until things like HBO that programmes started taking very different shapes. We've been taking the expensive retail model for granted, because it's what we've known. There are a lot of side-effects – it made it hard to make small games. There was the complaint of where the innovation was, because it was incredibly risky to spend millions of dollars on something that might not work. Just the shift to 99¢ games was a revelation – once you get to the model of free, it's natural that people will want it, because who doesn't want something that's free?

How does making a game free affect its design?
The problem is that game designers are not used to thinking about this stuff. They're used to thinking about making the coolest possible game so people will tell each other to buy it, and so that once the player's in the game you don't have to think about money any more. The big change is, designers have to think about the moment of payment. They're used to engineering psychological moments anyway, but now they have to make the moment of payment as big as possible. It's marketing thinking, and you kind of want a marketer in the meeting, making decisions about game design. It feels gross, but if you're going to go there, you've just got to deal with it.

Do those feeling gross have a point?
Yeah, it's interesting – there's an example that nobody brings up, where the reverse happened. When Disneyland opened in 1955, you paid to go on each attraction. And then in the early '80s they experimented with letting you buy one big ticket. It was much cheaper to buy the attractions one by one, but people loved the feeling of going into a world where everything was free. This is the same conflict we have in free-to-play versus retail. You could have a *Skyrim* where it's free and you buy things as you go, but it would feel gross. What's exciting is that the whole world is open to you.

Are there subtler means of implementing the free model?
Look at games by Bigpoint, in which you're often just outright purchasing weapons and equipment. Sometimes it feels kind of gross, because you're great because you put $5 in for a cool weapon, not because you're a great player. What I think was clever about *Dungeons & Dragons Online* was that instead of saying, 'You want to beat the dragon? Spend $5 and get a +3 battle-axe,' they say, 'Want to go in this dungeon? Pay $5.' You work hard and defeat the dragon and guess what? There's a +3 battle-axe at the end. In one you feel like you've earned it, and in the other you feel like you bought it.

Where does player creativity sit in all this?
What it really all comes down to is having an understanding of what people really like to do. In the DICE talk I painted a picture of a world in which people are driven by rewards. But there's such breadth in what we find truly rewarding. People find it rewarding to create things, and also to show them off to people, and even more to find strangers talking about how great they are. In some ways, the antidote to the gamepocalypse is the fact that as human beings we find so many different things interesting and engaging. People always ask me where games are going, and they're going everywhere. Anything we find enjoyable, that's where they're going. Allowing people to be creative and finding ways for them to feel like they're a part of building something just hasn't been done enough. It's wrongheaded to think of the videogame player as someone who just wants to consume. Most of them just want to explore: a new game is a part of the videogame universe they've never explored before. ■

Puzzle Clubhouse allows its players to be part of development, offering them the chance to vote on new features. Crucial to its design has been for Schell to understand the psychology of crowdsourcing



www.bit.ly/NjnUzs
More from Jesse Schell

PLAY

REVIEWS. INTERVIEWS. PERSPECTIVES. AND SOME NUMBERS

STILL PLAYING

Spelunky 360
We arrive in the City Of Gold with a jetpack and a stockpile of 63 sticky bombs. Of all the fully destructible environments that we've fully destroyed, this was the most euphoric rampage by far. After mining unfathomable riches, collecting the Book Of The Dead and killing Anubis II, we reach Olmec. But when he crashes into the lava, he's just narrowly misaligned with the doorway to Hell. How perfectly *Spelunky*: nirvana one moment, teeth-grinding anguish the next.

Syndicate 360, PC, PS3
No, it doesn't do justice to the high concept of its retro roots. No, it doesn't engage the brain like an augmentation crackling through your synapses. But what it does to your eyes is something wonderful. This is the videogame as visual stimulus with a solid if slightly shallow mix of pointing, shooting and manoeuvring bolted on. And it's overshadowed only by *Mirror's Edge* and Starbreeze's own *Riddick* games for its ability to convey a sense of locomotion and virtual self in a firstperson perspective.

Driver San Francisco 360, PC, PS3
Few other games are as capable of communicating the heady benefits of 60fps, especially when those buttery visuals are being articulated by the lazy drift of a Dodge Challenger across the middle of a downtown intersection, or you're zipping between oncoming traffic in a McLaren F1. It's hard to go back to tired old 30fps after.

SONY BRAVIA

We test games using Sony's LED full-HD 3D Bravia display technology. For details of the entire range, visit www.bit.ly/xgnl3d

REVIEWED THIS ISSUE



www.bit.ly/it2QiG
Up-to-the-minute reviews and previews

Mixing soundtracks and play to note-perfect effect

It's been over a decade since Tetsuya Mizuguchi promised those who played *Rez* the experience of synaesthesia, a sensuous blending of sight, sound and touch that his shooter was carefully calibrated to deliver.

After years of the simple beat-matching pioneered by *PaRappa The Rapper*, the rhythm-action genre seemed primed to change forever. *Rez*'s abstract appearance wasn't just a reflection of its cyperpunk storyline or a sop to the techno focus of its tracklist, but an attempt to represent the pure, powerful feeling of listening to each song. Meanwhile, its on-rails shooter form was an attempt to give players – via the process of rhythmically blasting enemies – a sense of connection to them.

The new wave never quite materialised, of course. Music games embraced plastic peripherals and party atmosphere over singleplayer intensity. But some of *Rez*'s spirit can be found in *Dyad* (p92). Shawn McGrath's game is an arcade shooter first, and as such is more interested in providing psychedelic visual design to prop up its intense mechanics, but *Rez*'s legacy can be found in the subtle way audio cues are worked into gameplay. *Dyad* wants to lull players into a nimble-fingered trance, and knows that sound is one way of doing so.



Sound Shapes (p102), meanwhile, is a game with a title that succinctly captures the idea behind synesthesia, and even more than *Rez* manages to embody the principles behind it too. Making platforms out of vocals, and enemy attacks out of beats, Queasy Games has taken songs and turned them into spaces. These are spaces you can jump and roll through, spaces you can create and edit, and spaces you can explore. How well you'll get on with a soundtrack featuring Beck, Deadmau5 and John Guthrie is something you'll already know. But what it's like to experience music like this? That's something you'll have to find out.

Sleeping Dogs

According to cinema, being an undercover cop is invariably rough work. Law enforcers masquerading as crooks, we're repeatedly told, are forced to question their loyalties and pick sides. Developing an open-world action game also poses a question of allegiance: should developers serve their narrative, or player autonomy within a big-budget sandbox? With *Sleeping Dogs*, United Front Games has erred towards the former, delivering a game about Triads and detectives that's at its best when funnelling you through the set-pieces of its story, and becomes more scattershot when offering distractions from it.

Playing as undercover policeman Wei Shen, your job is to work your way into the Sun On Yee gang. It's a task built on four core pillars: running, shooting, hand-to-hand combat and driving. There are overlaps, too, having you fire from car windows or motorcycles, and you'll shift quickly from one gameplay style to another as you hunt rival gangs across *Sleeping Dogs'* sprawling Hong Kong cityscape. Indeed, in its fusion of running and scrapping with a martial arts movie flavour, *Sleeping Dogs* calls to mind 2004's *Jet Li: Rise To Honour*. Both aim to place you in a Chinese action classic and both fail to fully suspend your disbelief, their ambitions betrayed by occasionally ropey production values as well as scripts that can't come close to even the most clichéd of Golden Harvest or Shaw Brothers releases.

Like some of the shady denizens of its story, *Sleeping Dogs* is also a thief with ambitions above its station. The influences on its component parts are clear: the one-button parkour chases are informed by *Assassin's Creed*, the counter-based brawling is lifted from Rocksteady's *Batman* titles and the driving feels like a descendant of United Front's own arcade-flavoured *ModNation Racers* (with a similarly choppy framerate) in the clothing of Rockstar's zippy *Midnight Club*. Nearly inevitably for such a mix of influences, the resulting package lacks the polish of the games it draws on. Driving is hampered throughout by lightweight vehicle physics; character animations can look robotic, whether you're in the midst of a firefight, the heat of a punch-up or leaping and bounding across town in pursuit of a felon; and the parkour has neither the same freeflowing depth nor the potential of Ezio's world of seemingly infinite ledges and handholds.

So there's never a sense of grace to Wei Shen, but otherwise he's an engaging lead. He comes off as a mash-up of Tony Jaa and Bruce Lee who walks tall, speaks softly and delivers one hell of a roundhouse kick. Wei Shen's charm is largely down to his voicework, which is provided by film and videogame actor Will Yun Lee. He's backed up by a solid ensemble of character actors, including Lucy Liu and Tom Wilkinson. They add a heavyweight presence to characters that might otherwise have been forgettable bit-parts.

Publisher Square Enix
Developer United Front Games
Format 360, PC, PS3
Release Out now

www.bit.ly/NneGG5
Screenshot gallery

Both mission types offer an at times gripping 12-hour romp of face-smashing, roof-hopping entertainment



Shen's story missions come in two flavours: Cop and Triad, with each earning new abilities for two distinct progress trees. Cop missions unlock firearm-based skills, such as extending your slow-motion powers, while Triad tasks grant you with greater melee skills and open up more fearsome kills. A Face meter, a measure of your level of respect, also brings new perks, such as a valet who'll deliver you a car at any time. Between them, both mission types offer an at times gripping 12-hour romp of face-smashing, roof-hopping entertainment, regardless of the technical shortcomings.

A bloody shootout at a wedding ceremony and a battle through a hospital (a nod to the climactic scene of John Woo's Hard Boiled) offer up some of the game's high points, interspersing punchy cutscenes with sharp bursts of action. The short attention span of such missions, ushering you from car chases to shootouts and getaways, prevents you from scrutinising any one element for too long. It's a cunning way of playing to the game's strengths, but at times its flaws can be all too obvious. Bugs range from inconsistent police behaviour (blowing a lone cop car to smithereens can be enough to remove your wanted status) to railings that send your vehicle flying. At times, the AI can be comically inept, too, perhaps leading to you duelling with a drug dealer who refuses to turn around and face you as punch him in the back of the head.

Peripheral missions and sidequests are plentiful by *Sleeping Dogs'* midway point, but they never provide the character or originality you'd hope for from a game with characters that have names like Johnny The Ratface and Old Salty Crab. Mundane dating missions pale in comparison to the likes of *Yakuza*'s hostess bar frolics, while street races play out like pale last-gen imitations of *Need For Speed: Underground*'s drag races. Collectibles, meanwhile, are in disappointingly easy-to-find, ground-level places – why bother to create a protagonist who is so athletically gifted if all the goodies are on the floor? There is, at least, the opportunity to listen to Flock Of Seagulls in the karaoke minigame, and the scavenger hunt for stolen dojo statues is a consistent pleasure throughout, unlocking extra moves. This also offers up some neat little close-quarters brawls with students who will no doubt have their mothers filing complaints with the teacher when they arrive home with rearranged faces.

Throughout it all, cinematic influences can be felt in every frame of *Sleeping Dogs*. Offering a view of Asia through the filter of its action film industry, this is a depiction of Hong Kong that could have come straight from the reel. As you cruise around the slums, docks and neon-soaked streets in the game's first few hours, you're reminded of some of contemporary Hong Kong cinema's most iconic scenes. Warehouse shootouts and

RIGHT Incoming enemy attacks are indicated by a red highlighting of the culprit, indicating your window to counter. Grabbing enemies also highlights environment-specific objects for you to slam heads into or break backs over. **BELOW** If a police chase escalates, it can result in a full-blown SWAT team arriving on the scene, equipped with heavy firepower and a no-nonsense attitude to taking you out. It can be wise to hunker down in one of the city's indoor areas if you plan on fighting a war of attrition to the bitter end. **BOTTOM** The city of Hong Kong is one of *Sleeping Dogs*' biggest draws, filled with well-observed ambient sounds, and dense with traffic. At night, it becomes a dazzling world of neon as you cruise around looking for trouble







ABOVE Cover-based shootouts require a level of caution, since Shen can only take a few hits. Diving over cover to disable and disarm a cowering enemy is a neat innovation that can turn the tables in a heated exchange



motorbike chases, complete with slow-mo dives, evoke John Woo's oeuvre of trenchcoat mafia action films. Sessions of bug planting and window-watching reconnaissance call to mind the espionage cat-and-mouse of Andrew Lau and Alan Mak's Infernal Affairs trilogy. Meanwhile, the eccentric and self-destructive street thugs and gangsters of the narrative echo Johnny To's canon of pacy thrillers. The game's bloodlust, however, brings to mind South Korean cinema's most brutal flicks, with the ability to make stylishly vicious use of the scenery. Simply grab foes and position them near highlighted objects and you can unleash a world of scripted pain. A hunt through the city for the city for a serial killer also nods to the slick and gory procedural thrillers that the region has produced in the last decade.

Despite the high-profile bill of acting talent attached to the game, the city in *Sleeping Dogs* is among its best defined characters. It's varied and vast, leading to the sense of a real place full of intricacies. It's a particular shame, therefore, that the fixed vehicle camera can feel so cruelly restrictive. Though your view can be tilted up and rotated as you roam around, the medium close-up does little to showcase the better environments and the game's sweeping scale. Coming from a studio clearly heaving with cineastes, *Sleeping Dogs* doesn't do enough to exploit its dense and detailed mise en scène.

With such a range of eastern influences, it's also disappointing that United Front seemingly lacks the confidence to fully immerse you in its Asian setting. You're never far from a western touchstone, whether it's the pop music blaring out of the radio, Wei Shen's New York twang, or the burly, steroidal villains of the piece, who speak mostly in English with the occasional Chinese swear word thrown in for authenticity. That



GADGET SHOW

Attempts to add tension via gameplay gimmicks as you journey through the underworld are mostly botched, relying on simple mechanics that become tiresome quickly, such as lock-picking and call-tracing minigames that never feel exciting or truly dangerous as you swivel the thumbsticks to find the lock's sweet spot, or tune in to the right frequency again and again. The lack of a sense of threat or consequence is in part due to *Sleeping Dogs'* low level of challenge – it's a very forgiving title, accessible to all, with generous checkpoints peppered throughout missions.

ABOVE Motion blur adds a strong sense of speed to high-velocity jaunts across Hong Kong, but if time is of the essence then you can always hitch a ride in one of the many taxis cruising the city. This, however, will cost you

said, the ambient audio of the streets deserves special praise, having been recorded during reconnaissance trips to Hong Kong by the development team.

Kane & Lynch 2 proved how the sense of alienation and disorientation westerners feel in an eastern setting can enhance a game about paranoia, but *Sleeping Dogs*, a game specifically about identity, doesn't use its setting to emotive effect. The script falls flat in trying to keep you both invested and on edge, giving in to cheap cliché and racial stereotyping. One particular womanising rapper stands out painfully in the final third.

When Activision axed production on what was planned to be the third entry in the *True Crime* series, CEO **Eric Hirshberg** said the title wasn't "good enough" to compete in the fierce market of open-world games. The question, then, is whether new publisher Square Enix should have let this sleeping dog lie, and the answer is hazy. You'll find well-executed entertainment here, some moments worth fighting for, but without the glue of a good script or the polish of a blockbuster to hold its disparate parts together, *Sleeping Dogs* feels as trapped as its hero. It's incapable of committing fully to the action movie thrills it seems so enamoured of, perhaps due to the resources that have been siphoned away to fuel its open-world obligations and scale. Like an early Bruce Lee flick, *Sleeping Dogs* contains flashes of brilliance that stand out amidst an uneven whole. But, unlike Lee himself, it's likely few will remember *Sleeping Dogs* as either an innovator or master, but merely a student of greater games.

6

Post Script

Interview: Dan Sochan, producer

From United Front's Vancouver base, **Dan Sochan** oversaw production on *ModNation Racers* before moving over to *Sleeping Dogs* to help get the game to the finish line. His background is in design, however, having previously worked for EA Black Box. Here, he tells us the aims, ambitions and inspiration behind *Sleeping Dogs*, and how the team tried to balance realism with sensationalism in its kung fu opera.



What was the ambition behind *Sleeping Dogs*?
We wanted to create an open-world game that really focused on moment-to-moment gameplay, making the elements you spend the most time doing – the running, the driving, the shooting – enjoyable in themselves, not just a means to an end. Taking experiences we'd had at Black Box on *Need For Speed*, other guys [who'd worked on open-world game] *Bully*, [and] bringing all those together and making martial arts combat the focus.

There's a strong filmic influence on the game...
A lot of us are Hong Kong cinema fans. We looked at old-school Jackie Chan, Jet Li, John Woo's Hard Boiled. We [wanted to take] all the best aspects of that, but give it more of a western twist, make it a bit more palatable for all – not such a niché market.

Would you say the game targets a western audience? How has the Asian market responded to the title?
[The eastern market has] really liked seeing an Asian protagonist. He's a powerful but charismatic character. We've tried to appeal to both [markets]. Sometimes Hong Kong cinema, especially older releases, can be lost on western markets, because they are a little cheesy, over the top, slapstick. We've tried to take the best elements: the presentation, cinematography of a John Woo film, but making the story a little more gritty, realistic, mixing a cast of Hollywood and Hong Kong cinema actors to get the best of both worlds.

> "We've tried to take the best elements: the presentation of a John Woo film, but making the story a little more gritty"



How did you decide on Wei Shen's look?
That was the biggest challenge [in character design]. We went through multiple iterations, from very thin and wiry to the second-to-last iteration: a giant beefcake, a brickhouse of a man who'd rival Schwarzenegger in his heyday. We went back and forth on that and eventually went somewhere in between, where you can believe he's athletic and able to do parkour. It was getting that right balance. Initially [the enemies] were really thin and wiry, which is actually more representative of the type of gangsters you'd see in Hong Kong – it was for gameplay reasons we played with that, as we have different types of gangs in the story. That's where we had some artistic freedom and were a little less representative than we'd like to have been, but it was for the benefit of the gameplay.

How did you research the setting?
We went to Hong Kong several times. We took tens of thousands of photos. We would record people just walking along the street – see how they would interact with each other, recording audio. We tried to be authentic; we didn't want it to feel like a parody of the city at all. I have to say that was a challenge for us. There were numerous times where there was something that we as westerners think of [regarding] Hong Kong, but when we were there and researching we found there were cases where that wasn't accurate and we removed it from the game. Even if it was something we felt strongly about, we always decided we'd err on the side of authentic. Something like the paper lanterns: we had them all across the city, we envisioned them [all over] Hong Kong; going there you very rarely see that. Another example: there was a push to make the game very sexy and that's something you don't really see in Hong Kong, [things like] strip clubs.

What sort of contact did you have with the Triads?
We had a contact in Hong Kong who allowed us to meet with former undercover police officers, the head of the Triad task force, as well as a few Triad members. It was our writer who went in and met with [the Triads]. They didn't want to meet with the group. He went in and scanned the room. We'd done research and their weapon of choice was the cleaver, so he scanned the room for any cleavers. [Laughs]

Was the *ModNation* team working on *Sleeping Dogs*?
We had two separate teams in-house. One was working on *ModNation*, the other one on *Sleeping Dogs*. A few of us have switched over across the teams to try to share some of that expertise.

So did development on *ModNation Racers* inform *Sleeping Dogs*, then?
There were a lot of [lessons] we had from *ModNation*, especially in terms of world development, how to be able to quickly iterate, to create tools and technology that put the creation in the hands of the designers and artists. I think our initial world editing system on *Sleeping Dogs* was really basic. What we learned from *ModNation* was how to allow people to quickly iterate. Even looking at the [UGC side] of *ModNation*, where people are able to take some of these tools and create things, and in terms of optimisation: how to allow thousands of buildings to be in a track and then shared in a file that's only a few hundred kilobytes. ■

Dyad

Dyad is both shooter and a racer, which should be quite enough for any videogame to take on. If you're prepared to squint a bit, though, you'll see that this is a game with deeper ambitions, too. If you peer past the leaderboards and psychedelic particle effects, the whole thing becomes a brisk little primer in arcade archaeology – and this secret element turns out to be a lot more fun than it sounds. The ideas driving *Dyad* may sometimes seem complex, but they rarely weigh it down. The pace is frantic, the tone is light, and the syllabus is richly varied.

Shawn McGrath's game is set inside a tunnel, and the tunnel stretches all the way back to the days of *Tempest*. As you drill into the past – whether you're blasting at targets or fighting against the clock – you'll be digging your way around confident genre classics like *Rez*, but you'll also be turfing up far more wayward oddities such as Jeff Minter's mesmerising and often underappreciated *Space Giraffe*. This is a videogame with a serious, potentially overpowering lineage, in other words, and it comes with a sturdy, unspoken sense of its place in history.

That each play session manages to leave you with such a strong appreciation of the game's own identity is a testament to the manner in which its designer skilfully juggles established ideas and blends genres together in unexpectedly coherent ways. *Dyad* may be drawn towards old concepts, but it ultimately emerges with something new.

Those old concepts are never far away, however, and for the first few minutes all a novice player is likely to notice are the glittering trophies that *Dyad* has lifted from other titles. Spotting the potential influences can be an entertaining process in itself, as can teasing out the point at which homage ends and fresh design begins. *Tempest* is the prime mover, of course, since Dave Theurer's stylishly abstract blaster provides the template for both the luminous aesthetic and that famous into-the-screen perspective, setting your craft spinning around the walls of a glittering wormhole. From *Rez*, meanwhile, the game gets the courage to expand on its colourful, otherworldly ambience, along with a willingness to mix in audio cues alongside standard rail shooter mechanics.

It's when the tunnel zips past *Space Giraffe* that *Dyad* seems to really load up its cart, though. Few contemporary designers can keep the arcade spirit alive and evolving quite like Minter, and McGrath's game ends up with a similar a fondness for bloomy visual noise, a taste for its own arcane terminology and a skill with handy post-match infographics. More than anything, *Dyad* has the soul of a Llamasoft game – even if it prefers to wrap it up inside the cool lines of industrial design rather than with that famously wonky sense of humour.

Publisher RSBLSB Games
Developer In-house
Format PS3
Release Out now (US) TBA (EU)

Dyad may be drawn towards old concepts, but it ultimately emerges with something new



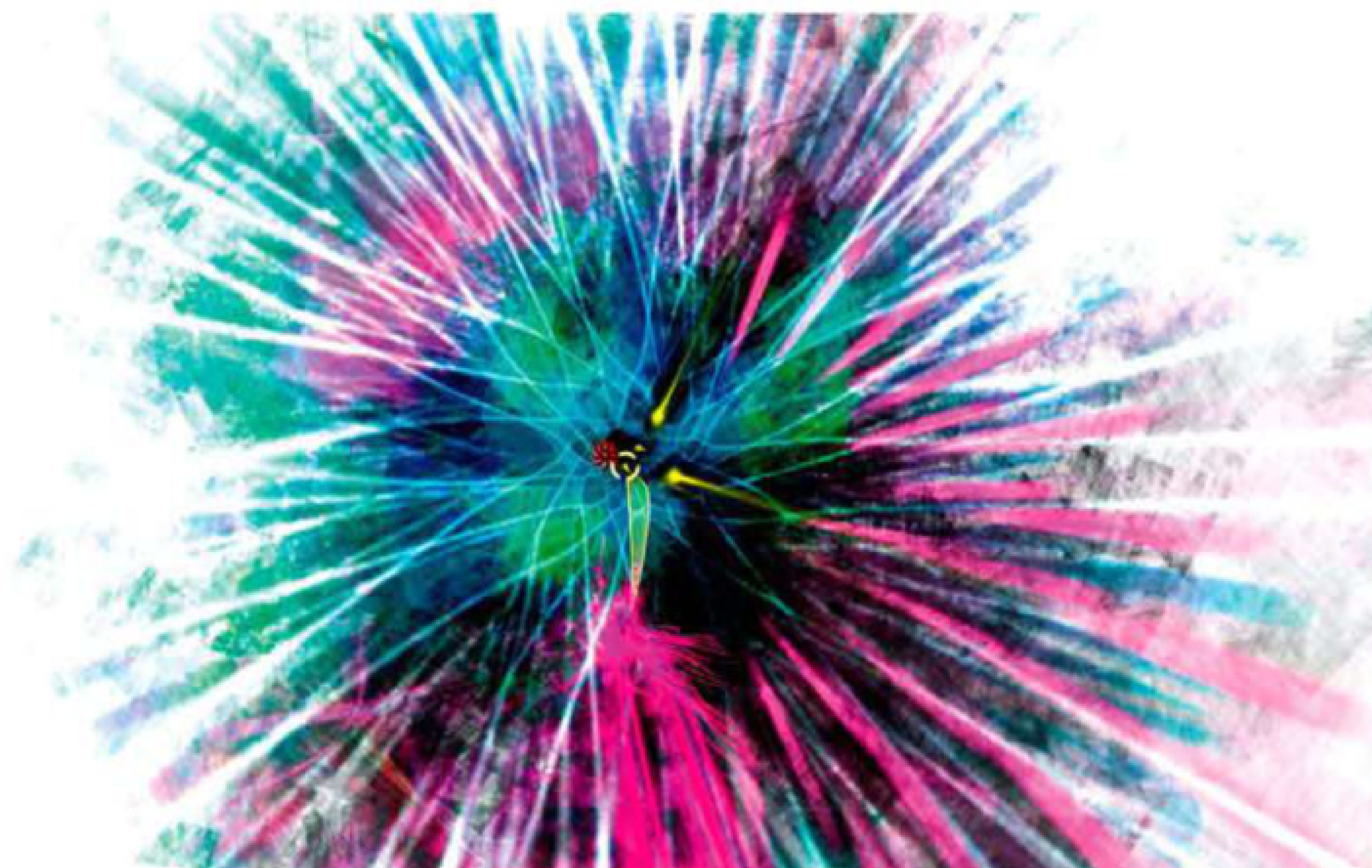
So what has this Frankenstein-esque patchwork of parts created? A game that turns out to be surprisingly intuitive at heart, even if it doesn't necessarily look that way on paper. As you move through each level's endless tunnel, your most basic skill involves shooting – or 'hooking' – glowing enemies to get a speed boost from them as you barrel past. Next, you're encouraged to match colours as you hook. Over time, you're introduced to 'grazing' too, as you brush through the warped halos created by hooked enemies to build up something called a lance meter.

'Lancing' turns out to be an ability that lends you a handy burst of speed and momentum. Press the correct button and you'll suddenly rush forward, punching a hole through anything that gets in your way, which gives you a rare opportunity to crash into enemies instead of avoiding them. Lances can be extended, too, and then there are triads, which provide an incentive to sharpen your aim by offering up a nucleus orbited by two glowing electrons. Shoot the nucleus, and you'll create a zipline that allows you to pick up truly huge bursts of speed. Shoot the electrons, and you'll cancel the nucleus out, leaving you with nothing but another shimmering halo.

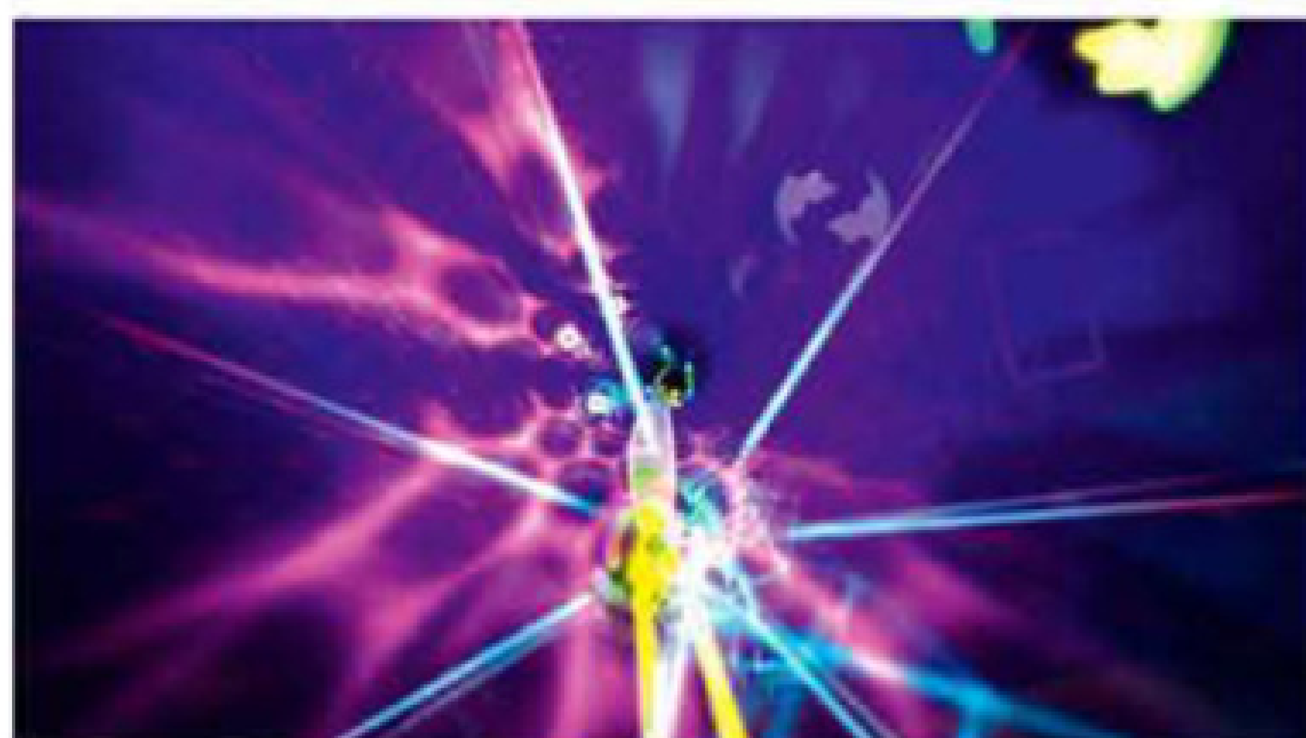
Lancing, hooking, ziplining triads: it all sounds complicated, but don't be afraid. Beneath the off-putting lingo lies an engaging spin on the same old dance between firing and dodging, boosting and steering, matching and chaining. And if it's far more clear-headed than you might initially expect, it's also a little more controlling, too. *Dyad*'s gifted with a peculiar kind of restraint that threads itself through even the most theoretically excessive moments on offer. Frankly, the whole thing can be perverse at times. The colours and sounds promise an endless barrage of freewheeling madness, and yet the game's mechanics prefer to keep you perched, for the first half of the campaign at least, just at the point at which everything is threatening to break loose. You have to earn your boosts and your light displays here, and it means that when a level finally does give way to chaos, it feels like a genuine event. It also ensures that your true objective, when learning to play *Dyad*, is to find out how to trigger pandemonium as efficiently as possible.

With so much history to draw on – and so much psychedelic turmoil waiting in the wings – *Dyad*'s most engaging characteristic over the long term is that it can never quite decide which genre it wants to belong to, and which game it should truly be. Instead, it has a go at everything, more or less, and the results are often fascinating. You're always hooking, grazing and lancing, but that doesn't stop early levels from fluttering you between action games and driving games, and even

ABOVE Unsurprisingly, McGrath cites CERN and its particle acceleration experiments as an early influence. It's fitting that the Higgs finally emerged from hiding shortly before the game's release. **LEFT** There's a surprising amount of variety within *Dyad*'s warping, flickering, evolving backdrops



BELOW Like *Rez*, *Dyad* can feel like a tool for making art as much as a game for fighting your way up the leaderboards. When everything clicks, it's hard to tell where art ends and arcade begins



ABOVE While the game isn't slow to introduce ideas, they generally work beautifully within the framework, and tend not to mess with the aesthetic. The density of visual noise rarely gets between you and the mechanics



straight-up puzzle mechanics. Later stages can't resist the impulse to introduce strange new ideas that warp the way you play even further.

It at least knows what will tie each genre experiment together, though: every level slowly builds momentum as you dash along its tunnel, and they all worship at the altar of the three-star rating and the content unlock, meaning that the small selection of events belies a much deeper campaign as you head towards mastery, and that the path from confusion to unlikely enlightenment is paved with sharp little victories, regularly spaced and alluringly crafted.

And even as they reinvent the basic game, each challenge provides a clear objective – stay alive, collect things, get to the exit as fast as possible – while the little lulls in pacing as the game introduces every additional concept lends a kind of tidal rhythm to proceedings. In total, the 26 levels pass in a blur of colour and sound that lasts, at most, a few hours. Is that it? Not at all. By the end of your first short playthough, you'll hopefully have come to realise that you've only just started in on the true adventure. If the first of *Dyad*'s pleasures lies with seeing a smart arcade idea growing in complexity, one left turn at a time, then the second involves mastering that complexity, perfecting each task, maximising scores and eventually unlocking Trophy and Remix modes. Like the arcade classics that ultimately inspired it, *Dyad*'s true spirit lives within the leaderboards. As with *Tempest*, your best is never quite good enough. As with *Space Giraffe*, each victory tends to shake loose a few new strategies that might power you on to even greater glories.

It's an ambitious agenda for any kind of game, and at times it proves a bit too much. *Dyad*'s largely the work of one man, after all, and despite its obvious air of confidence, you can spot the signs of a pared-back development in the way that its graphics only truly dazzle when the assets are winging past at extreme speeds, or in the moments when the menus aim for a minimalist design-savvy crispness, only to hit a sort of bland primitivism instead. Musically, meanwhile, *Dyad* blends jazz, trance and tinkling noise to magnificently uneven effect. At times, it sounds like blasts of wind shifting though a complex network of hanging chimes. At others, it suggests a cruise liner organist bravely playing on through a choking fit, while a member of the crew administers the Heimlich manoeuvre.



JACKED

Dyad's early stages tend to make you work for each burst of speed. By the end of the game, though, you're pelting along, and one of the best levels on offer actually tasks you with trying to slow down again. I Really Missed Jack sees you picking up momentum as you race through its curving hallways, and your only hope for survival lies in chaining together invincibility orbs, each of which offers a gentle hit of deceleration. After a few hours of jabbing your foot on the gas, it's dazzling to have the pedal glued to the floor for you. The whole thing serves as another reminder of how simple rulesets offer a lot of invention for developers who are willing to tweak and experiment.

ABOVE **Ziplines are your ticket to major speed, sprouting out of linked enemies and sending you blasting into the distance. Inevitably, though, they make a collision a lot more likely, losing you all your momentum**

Such rough patches only make the overall achievement more laudable, however, and *Dyad* ultimately comes into focus as a smart and wilful game about light and momentum, shooting and dodging. When you're grazing along, chaining one burst of colour to another, laying down your own track and boosting to impossible speeds, this diminutive PSN title offers thrills that go far beyond those its oddball collection of mechanics should allow. As the velocity increases, it's easy to get disorientated, in fact, and you might begin to wonder whether the tunnels you're trapped within are ultimately moving you forwards or backwards through gaming history.

Eventually, you'll realise that the direction doesn't really matter, anyway. The true measure of this journey isn't where you end up, it's how fast your pulse is racing when each luminous tube finally spits you out into the darkness again.

8

Post Script

Interview: Shawn McGrath, creator

Dyad's a game that defies easy description. We sat down for a chat with **Shawn McGrath**, the project's Toronto-based designer.

After years of development, *Dyad*'s finally finished and shipped. What have you been up to since?
I was really, really depressed for, like, 12 hours, and then, well, I just started working on a new game, and I'm really enjoying it. I cleaned my house and read three books, and I've been putting substantially fewer hours into the new game.

***Dyad*'s very hard to place within a genre. Now that the project's finished, what do you see it as? How do you define it to yourself?**
I also struggle with this, trying to place the game within a framework of words. I think *Dyad* does a lot of things that are unique to videogames, and that's sort of what I was trying to do with it. Alan Moore has a famous quote where he said that he hates the movies based on his work because he was trying to do things that only comic books can do. As soon as you try to take that stuff and apply it to film, it breaks it. I have a real hard time translating what *Dyad* is from videogames to any other medium, because I think that what it does is stuff that only videogames can do. As soon as you translate it, a lot of the stuff makes no sense.

What was your starting point for the project? What did the first glimmer of the game look like?
It was a lot curvier than it is now. This is something that bothers me. I've actually had people saying, "Oh, the tunnel doesn't curve enough, I don't want to play it." But as soon as you go all curvy, it's hard to see things that are coming up, and you can't predict what's going on. The tunnel's supposed to be as straight as possible while still giving a sense of speed. But back then it was a really curvy tunnel, and there was a line on it with a gradient and particle effects, and it was really pretty. As you rode on the line you sped up, as you rode off the line you slowed down. That was it. That was going to be the entire game.

When I was doing that, though, I learnt something about racing games. Your success is inherently tied to difficulty. As you go faster, it inherently becomes more difficult. Therefore, why not explore that and figure out where that goes? And that's where the game came from.

Were you feeling your way through the entire design process like that?
I had no idea where the game was going up until about six months ago. There were way more mechanics than there are in the final game. They just weren't very good, so I cut them. It was just a completely disjointed set of about 70 levels.



"I have a hard time translating Dyad to any other medium, because it does stuff that only videogames can do"



When your game is so nebulous, how do you decide what stays and what goes?
I play it a lot. Throughout development, at least half the time was spent playing. Towards the end it was even more. For most of the time, I'd play it for eight hours a day, and I'd try to think of how things worked, and then I'd try and envision a goal. "OK, I have a lot of fun trying to play in a way that doesn't exist in the game. How can I make that possible in the game?" I always wanted the game to feel like you're on the edge of being out of control. That's why the lance exists, for example. The way that works, no matter how insane stuff gets, if you just press square, you're fine. I wanted to make it so you're always on the edge of being overwhelmed.

Like *Space Giraffe*, you embrace a lot of your own terminology: did 'hooking' and 'lancing' emerge from your own informal names for these mechanics?
Hooking was originally called 'vampire', because instead of tapping on an enemy you used to press and hold, and the longer you held, the faster you'd go and the more dangerous the enemy would become. You were leaching speed from them, so that's why we called it vampire. Lance, I didn't come up with. That was Pekko Koskinen who helped with a lot of the original design and worked on how the mechanics were originally. He's Finnish, and in Finland, javelin throwing is a big sport. It's the national sport, I think. We were looking at sports – stuff like bowling, and he was looking at the javelin, and working out how to make new mechanics for our game from them, and lancing came out of that.

***Dyad* has had a very long development, and for a lot of that you've been working alone. How do you keep yourself motivated? What's your routine like?**
I have a home office, and it's six steps away from where I sleep. I usually work all night, and I don't work during the day. I sleep between 7am and 3pm. My wife comes home, and then when she goes to sleep I get most of my work done. The biggest thing was that I didn't have a financial crunch because my wife has a pretty decent job and we live really cheaply. Not having a financial constraint just allowed me to do whatever the hell I wanted to. Part of doing whatever the hell you want to is that you just try a bunch of weird shit, and that's what keeps it interesting. With *Dyad*, you look at the level list, and there are new mechanics coming up until the second to last level. If you're constantly adding new mechanics and you're constantly changing the game, I guess it just doesn't get boring, you know? ■

Darksiders II

Working out which games Vigil has been playing is simple, because they all appear in *Darksiders II*. *The Legend Of Zelda*'s overworld-and-dungeon structure, which underpinned the original *Darksiders*, makes a reappearance here, along with *God Of War*'s combat system. Between scraps, the player character, skull-masked Death, scrabbles along walls just like the Prince of *Prince Of Persia*, and occasionally awakens (and kills) colossal stone beasts that were already on loan from Fumito Ueda when they appeared in *Castlevania: Lords Of Shadow*.

Darksiders II is so heavily indebted to so many sources that it struggles to stand as its own game. To be fair to Vigil, the team has further elaborated on its one original aspect – the Marvel-meets-Milton blend of Old Testament myth and trashy nu-metal stylings that is the *Darksiders* mythology. Death, for instance, has little in common with the spectral reaper of pop culture or the Horseman of Revelations. His scythe has been broken into two singlehanded curved blades, excellent for fluid, Kratos-style combos but lacking some of the elegance and simplicity of the traditional design. Michael Wincott's cut-glass throatiness, meanwhile, gives the character a deadpan delivery that makes for more engaging company than the one-note brawniness of the first game's lead, War.

And while *Darksiders II*'s cast is largely composed of Old Testament figures, Vigil has moved a step beyond the ravaged Earth that was the setting for most of the first game. Taking place concurrently with War's adventure (in which the Horseman was framed for kickstarting the Apocalypse ahead of time), *Darksiders II* sees Death attempting to prove his brother's innocence by exploring the more fantastical realms of Vigil's mythos. This means that while you might make the occasional visit to the Tree Of Life, you'll be spending more of your time exploring desolate ash plains ruled by a ghost-king, or lush green realms overseen by a pack of ravening Scottish giants. There's a move towards more typical high fantasy here – and it's come at the expense of the apocalyptic Book Of Revelations atmosphere of the first game.

Structurally, you're still being sent on plot-advancing fetch quests in dungeons sprinkled across a large and occasionally beautiful overworld, and what happens in those dungeons is the same blend of combat, exploration and puzzle-solving that defined the original *Darksiders*. Where that game was broad in its influences but workmanlike in execution, *Darksiders II* works hard to refine its diverse set of mechanics.

Combat has had the most attention lavished on it – the influence of Ben 'Tragic' Cureton, a combat designer known in the fighting game community, is easy to detect. *Darksiders'* combat, last time around defined by lazy, repetitive combos and all too easily welcoming a button-mashing approach, has now been injected with a shot of Dantean adrenaline. The influence of *Devil May Cry* is as obvious as the brutality of *God Of War*.

Firstly, there's no block move, which leads to a *Bayonetta*-style focus on perfectly timed dodges that, pulled off correctly, even result in purple-hued special attacks recalling that game's Wicked Weaves. For many, this will be the only change worth noting – the absence of stand-your-ground defensive manoeuvres making Death a more nimble, positioning-focused brawler than his brother. But for those who care just as much about the state of their combo counter as their health bar, *Darksiders II*'s battle system offers genuine scope for creative blending of moves. This is a game that understands the language of launchers, crossovers, and enders – and even if you don't, you'll intuitively grasp the devastating sentences they let you string together.

Publisher THQ
Developer Vigil Games
Format 360 (version tested), PC, PS3, Wii U (2013)
Release Out now

For those who care about the state of their combo counter, *Darksiders II*'s battle system offers you genuine scope

Sadly, enemy design rarely lives up to the combat system's potential. Few enemy types require you to rethink tactics– and most boss encounters are just repeated games of dodging behind the big brute's back. More irksome still is the way you're forced to choose between a lock-on that leaves you vulnerable to attacks from the rear, and a default camera view that makes stringing together a series of attacks tricky. The battle system here is more complex than the game seems to want it to be – and the only people who'll discover its nuances are those on the hunt for them in first place.

Elsewhere *Darksiders* remains mostly unchanged. The sequel's platforming is still cut-down *Prince Of Persia*, while puzzles are still basic lateral thinking exercises, built almost invariably around locked doors and switches. *Darksiders* might borrow *Zelda*'s trick of doling out new items and abilities relevant to the dungeon at hand, but it simply doesn't follow through with tasks that require imaginative application of them. There's a sizable adventure here but the repetition of basic tasks makes it seem padded rather than epic – too many dungeons send you on fetch quests for plot devices wherein the rule of three is doggedly applied.

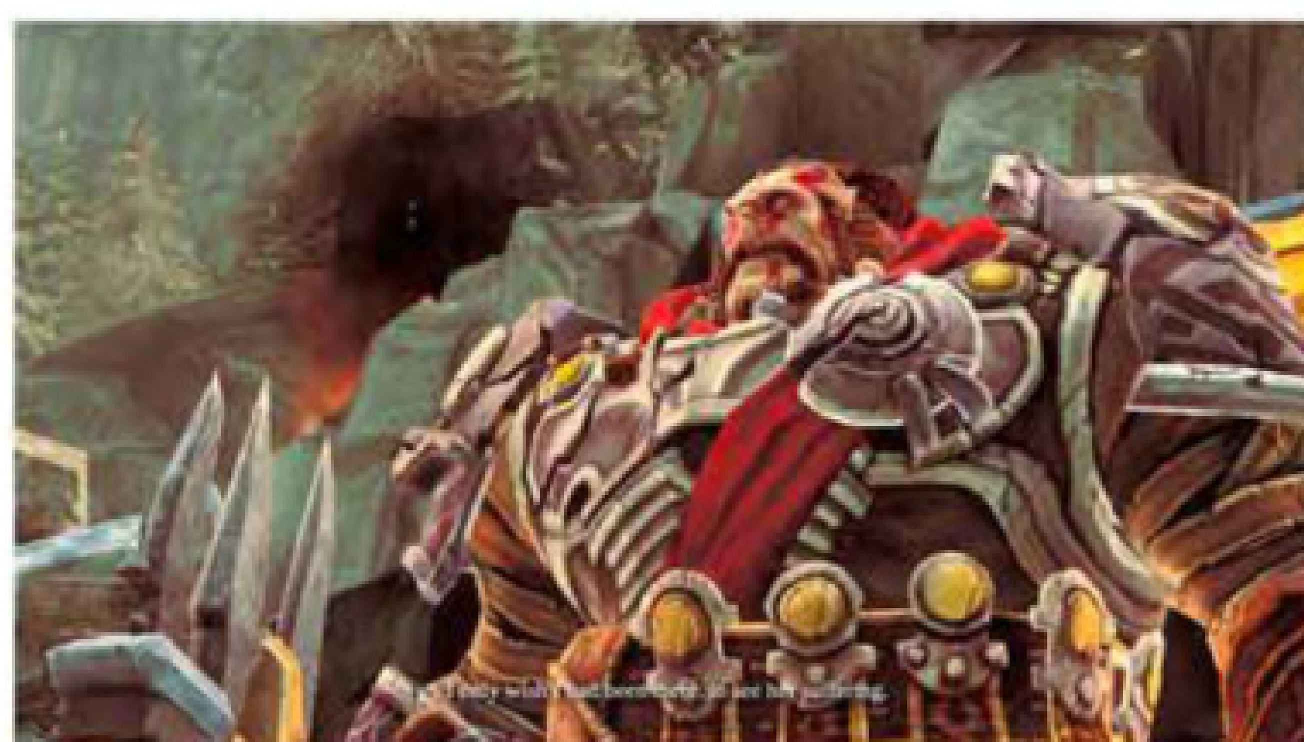
It's odd, because at other times there's a thoughtful attitude in *Darksiders II*. Boot up the game and you're given a story recap during loading. A light layer of RPG-trappings sees loot spill out of defeated foes, and you can instantly equip it without dipping into an inventory screen. Hold down the left stick at any time, meanwhile, and Death's faithful pet crow, Dust, will show you exactly where to go. These touches smooth over some annoyances, and allow the game's borrowed, interlocking systems – Dante's fighting, the Prince's wall jumping, Link's inventory screen – to exert their simple pull. *Darksiders II* might have been made from bits of other, better games, but everything it replicates it does so with respect, if not aplomb.

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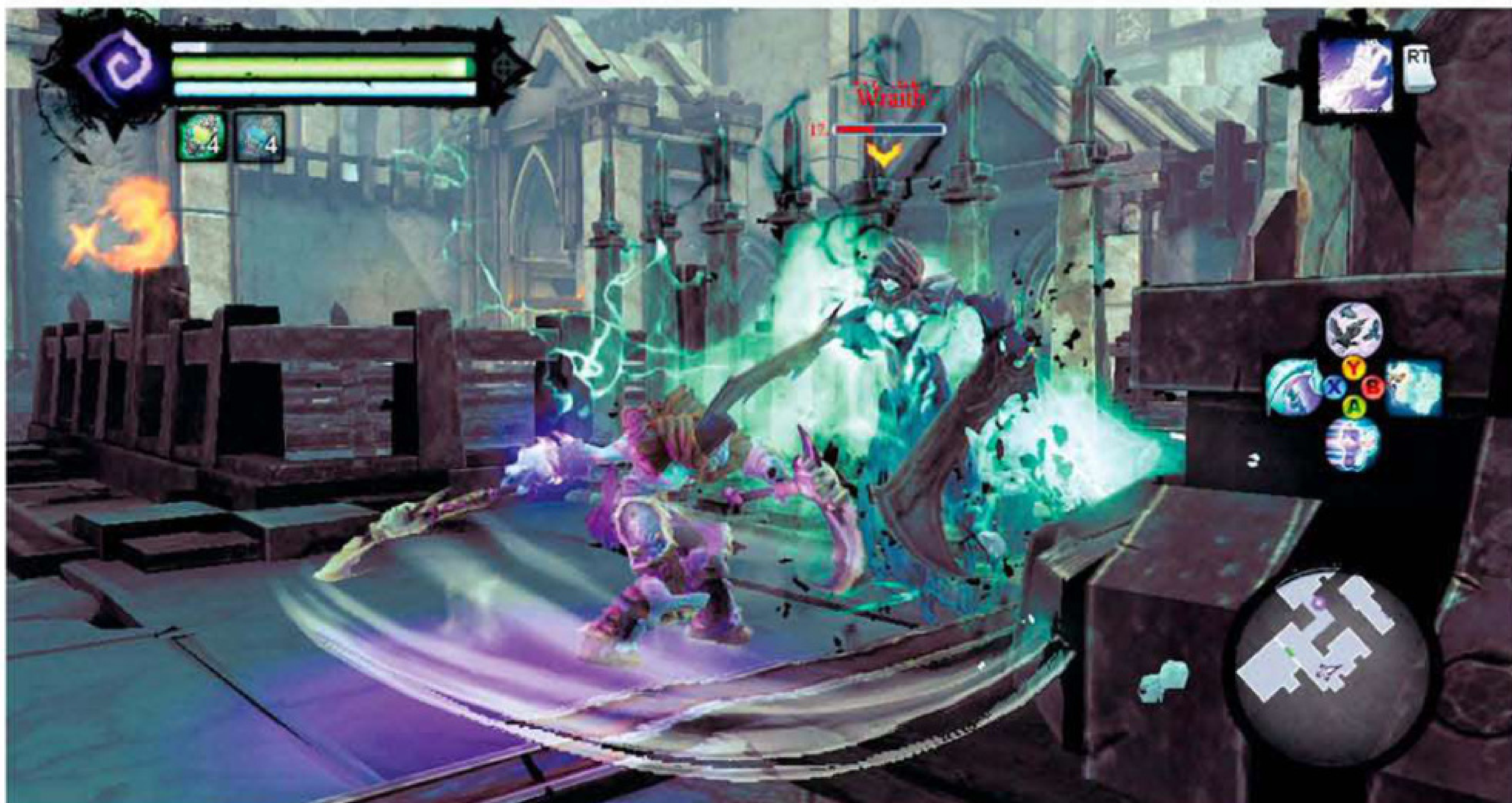


ROLE-SLAYING GAME
Hardcore fighting fans might be momentarily panicked by the sight of numbers (along with spurts of blood) spewing from sliced up monsters, but for the most part *Darksiders II*'s introduction of RPG mechanics is superficial. Loot seems designed to offer a satisfying sense of progression rather than interesting tactical choices, and a steady flow of items means you're constantly upgrading. A character progression tree offers initial freedom – but Death's range of powers turns out to be small, with the majority of upgrades simply tweaking attack stats rather than giving you new abilities to play with.





There's a hint of *Warhammer*'s art style to these giants. They're Makers, responsible for the creation of cities in Heaven and Hell – this game seems to hold its Judeo-Christian inspiration at more of a distance than the first





TOP Occasionally beautiful vistas convey a grand sense of scale that can't change the fact you spend most of *Darksiders II* trapped in relatively closed environments. **ABOVE** As well his primary attacks with the scythe, Death has a secondary weapon. This can be a slow, unwieldy hammer or a lightning quick pair of armblades. Certain weapons can be levelled up by 'sacrificing' unwanted loot. **RIGHT** The animation is excellent at conveying Death's savage speed, but moves don't always feel clearly delineated. The dodge makes for faster, more mobile battles than in the first game, offering temporary invulnerability to incoming attacks



Death can mount his horse, Despair, in an open environment by holding down the left and right bumper buttons

Post Script

Is it possible to make a good patchwork game?

Take the *Legend Of Zelda*'s item-based progression structure, mix in equal proportion action game battle mechanics, and sprinkle generously with a seasoning of RPGs and platform games. It's easy to suggest that Vigil lacks imagination in making a game so heavily influenced by other, more famous titles. But when you consider the pedigree of its inspirations, it's also easy to see precisely why it's done so.

The question, then, is why aren't the *Darksiders* titles some of the best of all time? They contain – in an era of third-person shooter dominance – generous amounts of the exact mechanics that players disappointed by *Prince Of Persia*'s fade from view or *Zelda*'s slow release schedule want to see more of, yet somehow both games have ended up less than the sum of their parts. Shouldn't a game made from pieces of titles at the pinnacle of their respective genres be the gaming equivalent of a supergroup?

Darksiders' issue definitely isn't one of jarring contrast – there's never the feeling of transitioning arbitrarily between playstyles. In fact, it handles it disparate mechanics confidently. Wall-running is smooth, and there's no mental adjustment needed when you land on the ground and unleash Death's scythes on a swarm of mechanical golems – even if the combos have more in common with purely action-focused games. Item management can feel a little clunky, but Vigil has employed the classic *Zelda/Metroid* structure of new abilities giving access to new areas competently.

The first issue, however, is one of control. *Darksiders* has three distinct gameplay styles vying for attention – and while all work in isolation, cramming them onto a gamepad has clearly proven a challenge. Death might have an inventory screen full of items and abilities designed to interact with his environment in interesting ways – the obligatory hookshot-style gauntlet, a gun that can blast explosive pieces of scenery from a distance, the ability to summon a troupe of ghosts – but he also has an extensive range of special attacks activated by the very same set of customisable shortcuts. You can set up Death for battle, or you can equip him for puzzle-solving, but either way the flow will be regularly interrupted by visits to the inventory screen.

More interesting is the way that *Darksiders'* distinct play styles interact with one another – or more precisely, how they don't. You can take for granted in *Zelda*, for instance, that the items you find in the hidden depths of its dungeons will be used to toy with enemies as much as environments. Indeed, *Zelda*'s villains are often just high-octane puzzles – the one-eyed Armos statues of *Skyward Sword* needing their tops unscrewed via the windblower-like Gust Bellows, for instance. *Darksiders II*'s combat is arguably its strongest feature, but its adherence to the rules of lightning-quick dodges and extravagant combos built from understanding the timing of light and heavy attacks means that – one or two boss encounters aside – it's never able to utilise Death's wider powers or new items in engaging and inventive ways. This doesn't spoil the combat in itself, but definitely affects Vigil's ability to build a cohesive world around any kind of core moveset. Conversely, the game's need for relatively open combat arenas at regular intervals means level design can only rarely embrace the kind of complex verticality that Death's wall-running, ledge-hanging skills were designed for when they originally appeared in *Prince Of Persia*.

There's a pick-and-mix pleasure to seeing so many inspirations woven into a single game. *Darksiders II* might have a set of systems pulling it in different directions, but it's never pulled apart. Even so, this is a game built to accommodate other games' mechanics – and never quite achieves the seamlessness of the games built alongside them. ■

Anarchy Reigns

Publisher Sega
Developer Platinum Games
Format 360, PS3 (tested)
Release Out now (Japan), early 2013 (EU, US)

Starting *Anarchy Reigns*, we go straight for Bayonetta. But playing just a few seconds of Platinum's multiplayer-focused brawler – known as *Max Anarchy* in Japan – is enough to reveal this isn't the same witch who starred in the studio's 2009 masterpiece. Just like everyone here, she has a dodge, but you can only use it when a move's animation is over. Key to Bayonetta's accessibility was her ability to cancel moves at will and cartwheel away to safety.

It's no surprise that many of *Anarchy Reigns'* characters feel compromised, including Bayonetta (who's available as a playable character via free download with copies of the game's first print run, and will presumably be offered as DLC later on). We've known they would since the game was announced, and Platinum surely realised it on the day its initial design document was produced. If everyone could dodge-cancel their moves, nobody would ever get hit. From the moment *Anarchy Reigns* was conceived, it was clear that it would be more *MadWorld* than *Bayonetta*.

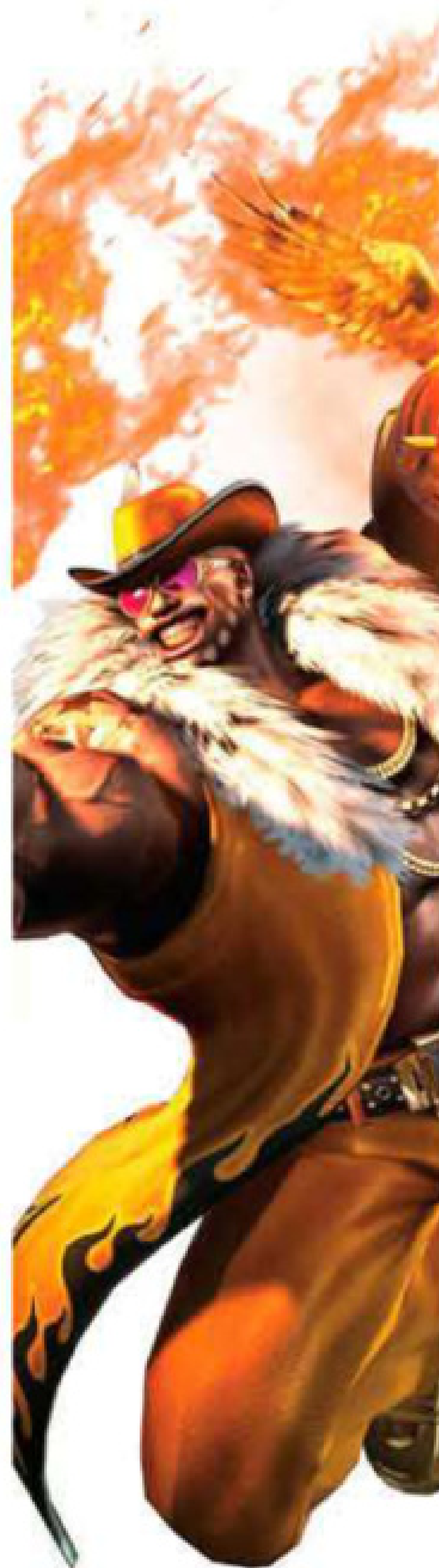
Indeed, other familiar faces come from Platinum's Wii brawler, including Jack, *MadWorld*'s chainsaw-wielding protagonist, and the Black Baron. Both are hulking figures, placed firmly on the hard-hitting but slow end of the traditional brawler scale. Indeed, most of the cast sit at this extreme or its polar opposite, with only a handful occupying the middle ground.

One such character is Leo, a member of the Bureau of Public Safety (BPS) and the star of one half of the campaign mode. Yes, *Anarchy Reigns* has been pitched as a primarily multiplayer game, but there's a generous singleplayer component here, with players choosing at the outset between the White (Leo) or Black (Jack) side. Whoever you choose, the goal is the same: track down Max, a BPS member gone rogue. Leo wants to rescue his mentor; Jack's services as a bounty hunter have been engaged by Max's daughter, who wants him alive.

While there's some overlap – notably in a few forgettable boss fights – these are discrete campaigns, intended as gentle introductions to the game's mechanics before you jump into the brutal multiplayer. You use the face buttons to jump, grab, and perform light and heavy attacks, and the latter two are modified by squeezing the left trigger to unleash a 'Killer Weapon', such as Bayonetta's Wicked Weaves. There's also a block button, a flaky lock on, and your dodge.

There's some depth here, but *Anarchy Reigns'* combat system can't hold a candle to genre high points such as *Bayonetta*, *God Hand* and *Devil May Cry 3*. Timing is key, since a slight delay between button presses modifies the next attack – launching a foe instead of pushing them away, for instance – while some characters can cancel specific moves by jumping or blocking at the right time. But the game's relative shallowness is dictated to a large extent by its multiplayer focus.

Neither its on- or offline offerings are essential, but Platinum has shown that an online brawler can work



Like a fighting game, *Anarchy Reigns* gives you its full set of tools the moment you first put the disc in. There are no new moves or weapons to reward progress, and there's no way to extend your health bar, which is an attempt to ensure balance when a new player comes up against an opponent who's already at the level cap of 50.

That's the theory, but your first experience of online play is unlikely to be pleasant. You'll get knocked from pillar to post by players who have learned a character and how to maximise miniscule openings. Watching such players at work is a learning experience, and you quickly get a sense of when the attacks in your arsenal should be used, and which of the items scattered about stages are most useful. Tyres and lamp posts, it turns out, briefly stun foes, setting up a free combo.

Or, more accurately, a free combo that will inevitably be interrupted by another player punching you in the back of the head. With up to 16 players on the field, *Anarchy Reigns* can be a messy experience. Platinum's borrowed its list of game modes from the FPS genre – including solo and team deathmatches, and objective-based modes such as capture the flag – and some work better than others. At its worst, *Anarchy Reigns* is a game of 16 people fighting in and over the same ten square feet, a stuttering mess of combos started and then interrupted from behind. Our few online successes have come in the smaller arenas, with four players split into two teams. It's easier to see what's going on, to coordinate assaults, and to actually finish a combo without being hit or grabbed out of it.

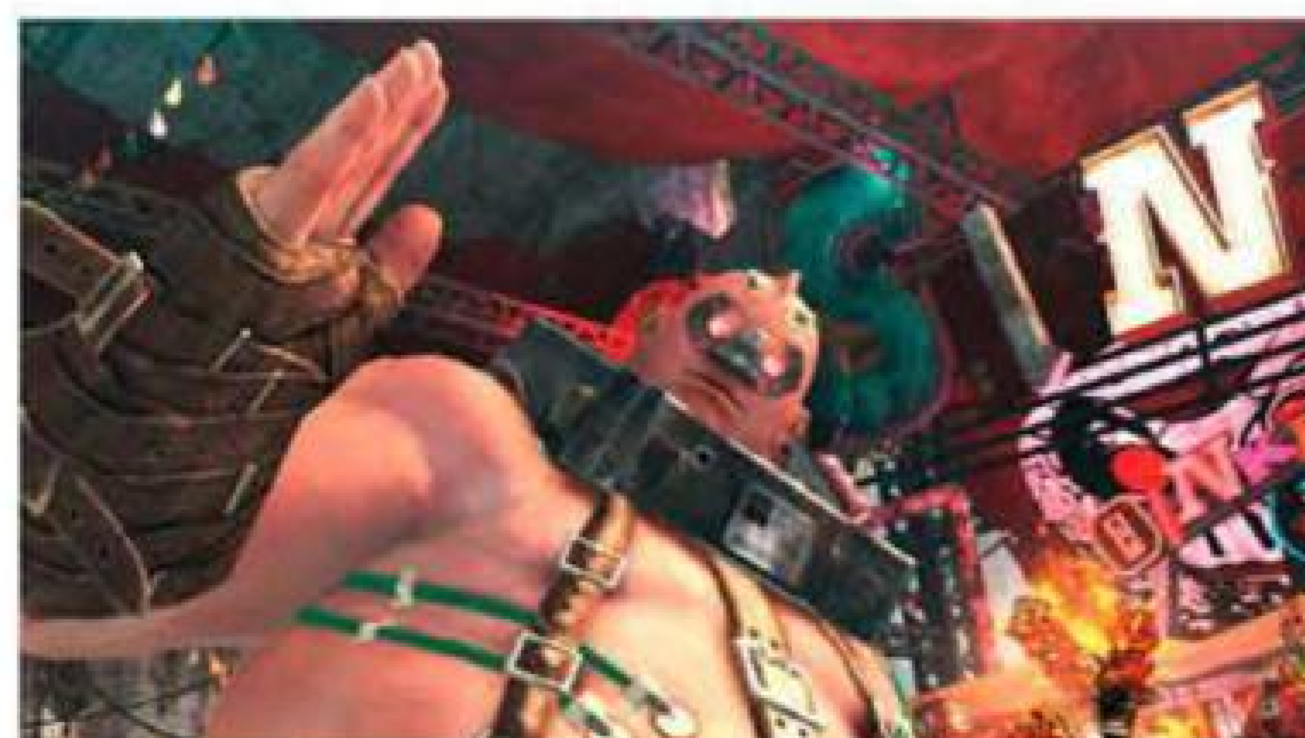
Platinum deserves praise for trying to move the genre forward, but it's not been entirely successful. The heavier characters seem the most powerful, since the strength of their attacks means they still do a hefty chunk of damage before their combo is halted. Grabs are vital; players block all the time, and you're unassailable during a throw animation. Garuda, the mech we've already seen rather too much of online, can grab two players at once and take off half their health. The levelling system feels positively glacial early on, too, your meagre scores barely making a dent in the total required to rank up. When you do, you'll unlock new characters – unless you've already played through the campaign, in which case you'll already have them. Perk-like abilities are unlocked later on, but often there's no reward for rising through the ranks.

Anarchy Reigns sits awkwardly, then: its balanced multiplayer mode means a fixed moveset and an unremarkable singleplayer campaign, while the high online player count means matches too often descend into scrappy pileups. Neither its on- or offline offerings are essential, but Platinum has shown that an online brawler can work. It's rough around the edges, sure, but it's a proof of concept to build on.

6







ABOVE Platinum is renowned as a great innovator of combat systems, and has a distinctly playful attitude to character design. What do you call a rotund combatant with distinctly porcine features? Oinkie, obviously

TOP As in her own game, the Wicked Weaves are the most potent weapons in Bayonetta's arsenal. Leo, seen here on the receiving end of an oversized stiletto, has Wolverine-like claws instead.
ABOVE Durga is surprisingly powerful given his slender build, his robotic leg capable of doing severe damage to foes caught in its limited range. That shocking pink costume is, of course, optional.
RIGHT Oinkie aside, *Anarchy Reigns*' roster is packed with stereotypes, from the ruggedly handsome Leo to the pimp-talking Black Baron. The female fighters, meanwhile, are all hard-bodied models in skin-tight clothing



Sound Shapes

Getting to grips with *Sound Shapes* can be a little like growing to love a new album. You memorise the tracks and then you start to understand them; you learn the music, and then, finally, you climb inside it.

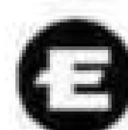
Queasy Games takes that last part quite literally, too. This is a platformer where every world is an EP and every stage is made from a song – each save point triggers a riffling beat, each coin you collect stands for a note, and each room you make your way across is a single, looping bar, waiting to be played in sequence. It's a true sonic landscape, in other words, and one that you need to explore using your ears just as much as your eyes and your fingers – listening out carefully to find gaps you can safely slip through, and pacing your jumps to fit in with the rhythm that's steadily unfolding all around you.

And although the tracks change, the aesthetics shift, and the environment exists in an endless, dreamy state of flux, you, at least, remain constant: a strange, wobbling mass – part melted vinyl, part bulbous fried egg – rolling in and out of each level and leaping from one spar of land to the next. You can stick to walls thanks to your thick outer membrane, or you can retract it to pick up a handy boost of speed. Light-coloured objects allow you to cling to them, while anything red kills you on impact.

The presence of leaderboards hints at the speedrunner lurking within the campaign, but for the most part *Sound Shapes* is more interested in variety than challenge. It wants to show you the many worlds that its tracklisting can build, and then it wants to fill those worlds with endless glittering gimmicks. One Beck song constructs a city of burning tower blocks for you to jump between as deadly clockwork rockets rove the skies overhead, while the next injects you deep into the veins of some lurid bio-engineered organism, with you to moving through bubbling bloodstreams and dodging toxic antibodies. Elsewhere, Jim Guthrie's minimalist refrains power an entire superscraper filled with bureaucratic minions and humming photocopiers, before Deadmau5 lures you down into throbbing subterranean caverns where gaming's ancient history has returned to life. *Asteroids*, *Galaxian*, and even *Breakout* are waiting to spill from the earth here, itching to unleash primitive coin-op chaos as the music stutters and skips.

At its best, each level is as enjoyably playful as it is visually dazzling, dipping into stealth scenarios and bullet hell one minute, and then hinging on switch puzzles and split-second jumping the next. Spread across five sprightly collections, the soundtrack is a muddle of folksy electronica shot through with moments of twinkling darkness, while the art – for all its reinventions – retains the clean lines and commercial quirk of a Threadless T-shirt or a skateboard decal.

Publisher SCE
Developer Queasy Games, SCE Santa Monica Studio
Format PS3, Vita
Release Out now



www.bit.ly/Muv9XH
Screenshot gallery

When elements tangle together, you find yourself lodged at the centre of a powerfully rewarding feedback loop

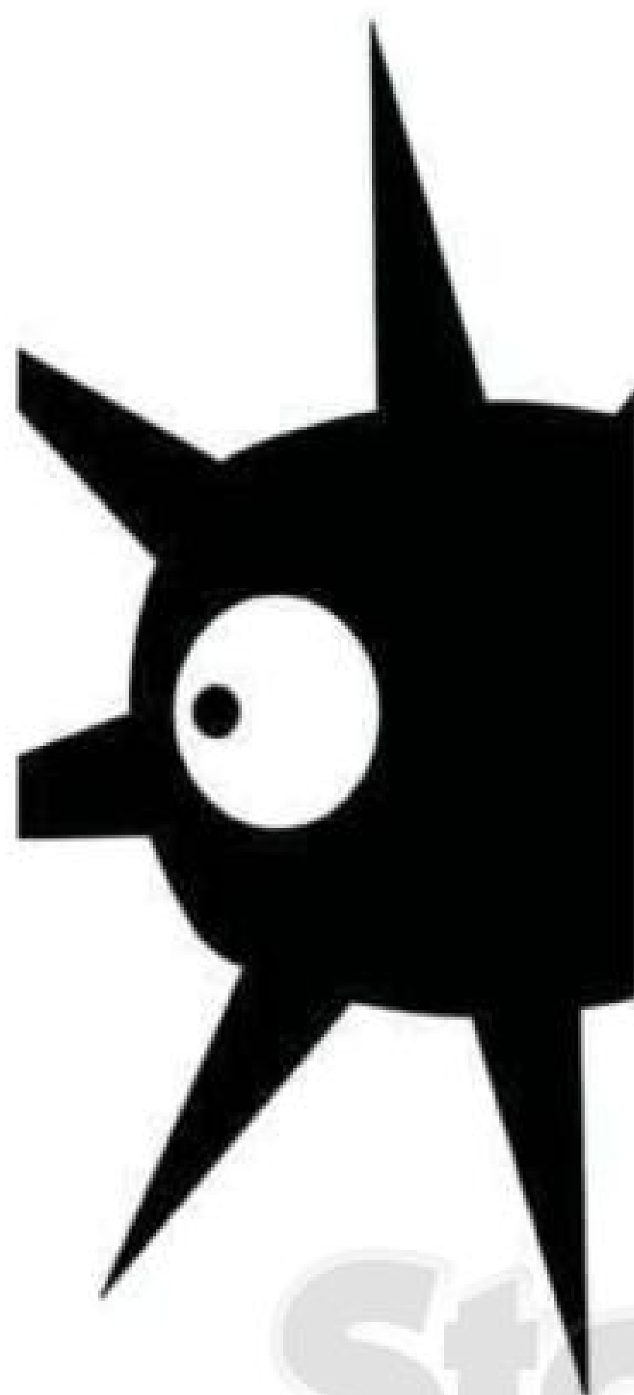
Both elements ensure that, scene-shifts aside, *Sound Shapes'* campaign is coherent and personable, offering the obsessions and depths of a real record collection. The game is a strangely calming place to explore, and when the various elements start to tangle together, you also find yourself lodged at the very centre of a powerfully rewarding feedback loop. Inputs become outputs as you move through each level; the song creates the world you travel across, while the collectibles you snag along the way then build more of the music in return.

If you want a challenge, there's Death Mode waiting after you've completed the main event – and it's ready to remix each track as a single-room coin hunt restrained by the strictest of time limits. There's Beat School, too, a complex game of call-and-response that plays you a dense snarl of sound before tasking you to recreate it. *Sound Shapes'* greatest success, however, lies beyond all that, eschewing the sparks and scatterings of the pre-made levels in favour of a powerful editor. Here, you can escape from the confines of the designers' imaginations and construct something for yourself, building your own worlds with assets culled from your initial playthrough, placing objects with a tap of the front-facing touchscreen if you're playing on Vita, and then resizing, rotating, and locking them down with the rear.

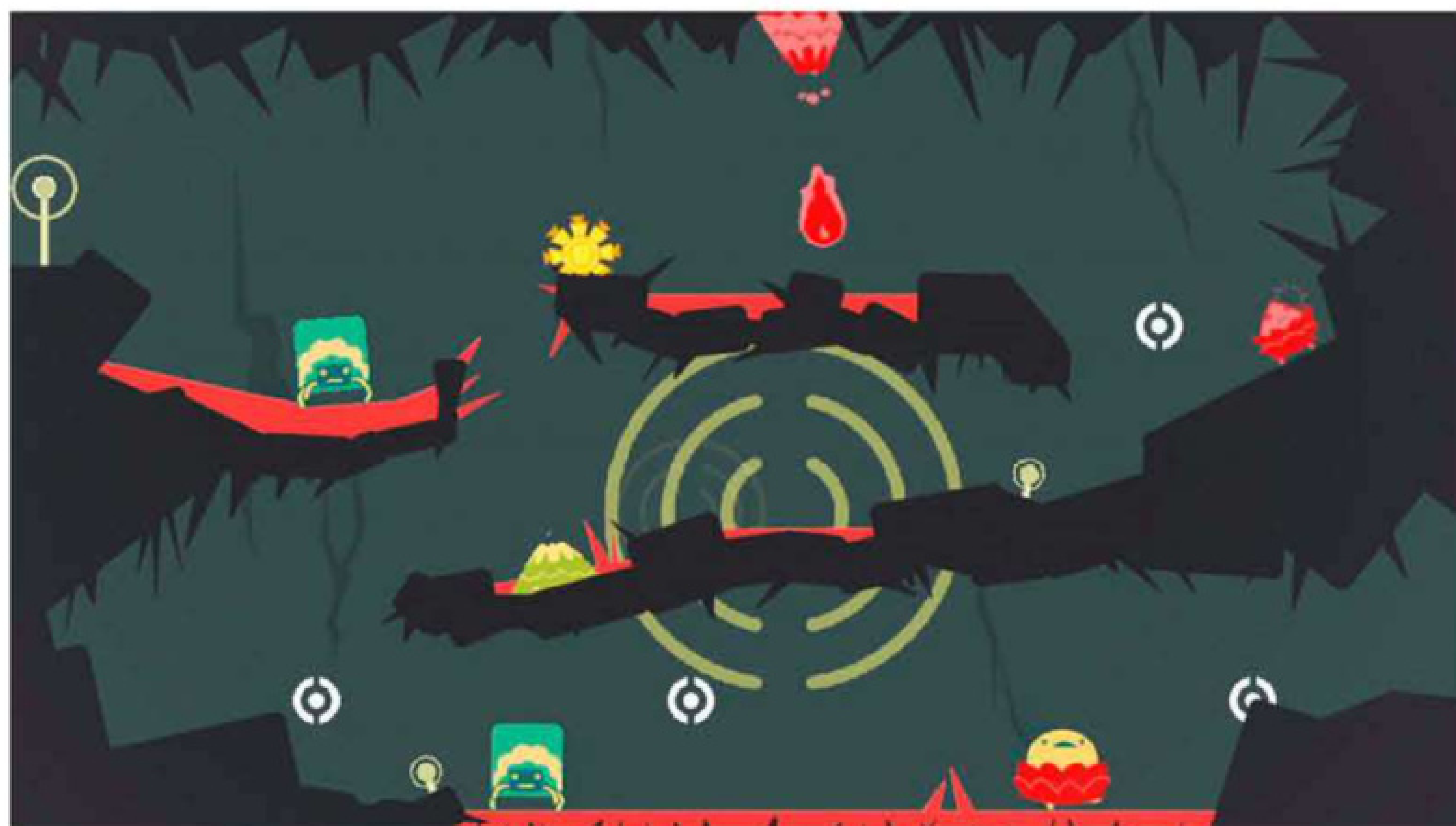
Offering complexity that builds up slowly, and from the simplest of possible interactions, the creation tools are an astonishing piece of clear-headed engineering. This is where the long-term appeal of the game lurks, as the download menu fills with knotty, babbling homebrew experiments to pick over and the community steadily grows more ambitious. It's where the true spirit of music is easiest to find, too, slipping in whenever you lose yourself in a sequence of notes, and urging you to then pull them together into actual chords and verses.

So while the campaign's filled with visual pleasures and colourful tricks, it's in the stark white spaces of the editor that *Sound Shapes* really dazzles, stepping away from the museum of hallucinations that all rhythm action games offer and threatening, at times, to become a genuine musical instrument in its own right. There's a new language to learn and new rules to grapple with, and the path to mastery isn't going to be easy. By offering it, though, Queasy Games moves far beyond a mere collision of melody and landscape, granting you access to the place where songs are actually made.

You enter *Sound Shapes'* world as a player, then – but when you leave it, you may well find you've turned into a musician.



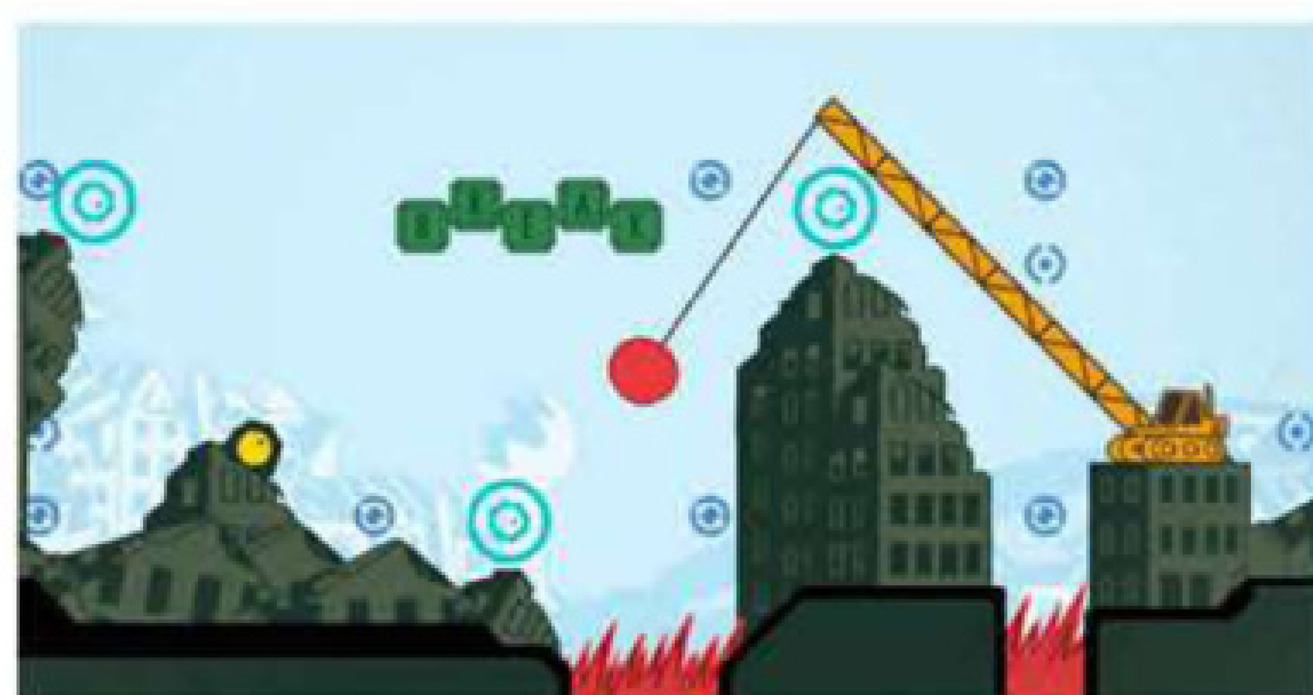
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LEFT Save points ensure that the game's trickier bottlenecks never grow frustrating. If you're aiming for a good spot on the leaderboard, though, you simply can't afford the restart time. BELOW Antibodies unleash bullet hell while Beck pieces together bizarre scraps of sound. His contribution offers what is probably *Sound Shapes*' most interesting musical backdrop. BOTTOM Colours tend to be bleached or dirty, and lines tend to be thick and clear-eyed: even if you don't like the music, this is a beautiful snapshot of contemporary visual design



RIGHT Cities by Beck has a bassline to kill for, and is one of the few games to blend lyrics into the mixture – even if most of them are onomatopoeic





New Super Mario Bros 2

Coins! Coins everywhere! There's an embarrassment of riches in the Mushroom Kingdom, as the golden discs burst from blocks, spurt from squished goombas – and even fall from the sky. That familiar chime upon collection will ring in your ears thousands of times in *New Super Mario Bros 2* – as part of a renewed focus on gold hoarding that seems to defy these troubled economic times. Indeed, play through a level of *New Super Mario Bros 2* and it's hard not to feel like accountant at Nintendo HQ totting up the sales figures for the first game.

Nintendo's focus on the sheer amount of gold in *NSMB2* might have seemed a little overly insistent during its E3 presentation – a too-obvious attempt to underline the differences between the 3DS sequel and its Wii U cousin – but regardless, EAD Tokyo has delivered on its promise of the most gold-stuffed *Mario* game yet. With one eye on co-op – and the competitive spark that limited collectible resources can inflame – the designers haven't simply sprinkled more coins over these levels: they've come up with a few new ways of collecting them, too. Some coins are merely white-dotted outlines until a player passes through them, the coin appearing moments later for a crafty player two to potentially grab. New power-ups betray *NSMB2*'s money-hungry capitalist leanings, too. A coin-spitting block sits on Mario's head, gradually adding to his coin tally every time you jump or move – and as such gently encourages flamboyant acrobatics. A gilded take on the traditional fire flower even turns Mario gold (and Luigi silver), letting him turn bricks to coins with the aid of the golden flames that shoot from his hands. Not all of the new power-ups are financially themed, however – fresh from its reappearance in *Super Mario 3D Land*, Mario's raccoon suit has a starring role.

But scrape away *New Super Mario Bros 2*'s glistening surface and you find more familiar minerals underneath – the robust but familiar blend of 2D *Mario*'s simple momentum-powered platforming, some carefully arranged levels, and the slick 2.5D retro-infused visual design that carried the first title to such assured success. Of course, when the first *NSMB* game was released, refamiliarising yourself with the series' stripped-down Mario was a challenge in itself. Without the aid of his 3D incarnation's trickier gymnastic skills, you're forced to rely on a simpler economy of jumps and dashes. The triple jump's still there, but the level design rarely offers the open space needed for that somersaulting third leap. There's an emphasis on precision platforming, in other words, that's simply not to be found in *Super Mario 3D Land*.

One thing *NSMB2* does have in common with Mario's most recent 3DS game – surprisingly – is assured use of the system's 3D effect. After the gimmicky excesses of earlier titles, Nintendo's in-house design teams have reigned in their use of the system's USP. It makes inevitable if paradoxical sense, then, this process has reached its culmination with a 2D game. A neat depth-of-field effect sees the level backgrounds blur out as you nudge the slider upwards - foregrounding the action itself but occasionally obscuring some incidental detail. It's a solution that meshes neatly with the unusual mixture of 3D models and 2D sprites that defines the series' aesthetic, giving Mario and his foes a pop-out-of-the-screen clarity.

Publisher Nintendo
Developer In-house
Format 3DS
Release Out now

www.bit.ly/NpTFFI
Screenshot gallery

Scrape away at the glistening surface and you find more familiar minerals underneath



That said, no amount of depth effects can change the feeling that you've seen this game before. The surreal whimsy of the Mushroom Kingdom is becoming overcooked, that familiar parade of lush green opening levels followed by deserts, snow levels, fire levels, underwater levels and the occasional castle beginning to take the magic out of *Mario*. It's not that the clever platforming challenges haven't been deftly threaded throughout – there are still breadcrumb trails of coins leading to knotty arrangements of platforms – it's simply that veteran *Mario* players simply won't experience the thrill of discovery that accompanied their first soar into space with *Galaxy*, or the delight at exploring *3D Land*'s chunky, angular world. The first *NSMB* traded on nostalgia – and *New Super Mario Bros 2* doesn't seem to understand that the first game's success at reacquainting players with the 2.5D Mushroom Kingdom means it simply can't do the same on its second outing.

It has ideas of its own, of course, and is liberally sprinkled with the kind of touches that ensure all that extra gold is polished to a shine. Koopas clap their hands in time to level music; returning enemy types behave (very occasionally) in unexpected ways; haunted houses startle with feints and misdirection. But if you want new features of any substance you must head outside of the main game and into Coin Rush, a new high-score mode that gives you a limited amount of time to bag as many coins as possible in minimalist versions of courses from the main game. It's an unabashed score-chasing mode in a series that's always valued exploration over speedruns, but it does give players unchallenged by the ordinary levels an excuse to push Mario to his limits.

More old than new, *New Super Mario Bros 2* is an inverted *Galaxy*, more content to remix old stomping grounds and sprinkle on new gimmicks than take Mario to places he hasn't hopped through before. Few titles can match 2D *Mario* for its peerless sense of weight and fine control – and *NSMB2* is a cartridge full of levels proving that fact. But Mario's not just about polish. He's about moving from left to right with giddy momentum, and *New Super Mario Bros* is a series that appears to be standing still.

7



ABOVE Boss encounters don't get easier than this – simply bounce on the underside of the dino's platforms to KO them. Battles against the ever-persistent koopalings do prove more challenging, however







TOP There's something almost comic about the sheer number of coins you find. One of the inflationary side effects is a decrease in the value of 1-Up – we had hundreds to spare midway through the game.
ABOVE Hop through a gold hoop and enemies suddenly become gilded – ready to be smashed into pieces by the (presumably rather heavy) golden shell clutched in Mario's hands.
LEFT As is traditional for the series, end-of-world castles offer the trickiest platforming gauntlets – low ceilings ensure that players used to swooping past challenges using a racoon tail power-up must take some risks for a change

Orcs Must Die 2

Making gaming magazines can be compared to a tower defence game: you train your big guns on the slow approach of the heavy-hitters and pray your preparations ensnare anything unforeseen. Some fleet-footed titles will always slip through, but in the case of nifty shooter-strategy mashup *Orcs Must Die*, which nimbly eluded our review pages last year, we seem to have been given a second chance. That's both a commendation and a criticism: the game's sequel, arriving less than ten months later, feels more like generous update than an entirely new game, bringing with it new levels, kit items, monsters and a twoplayer co-op mode to re-energise its otherwise barely-changed fundamentals. Nonetheless, those fundamentals remain a rich source of deliriously chaotic thirdperson carnage, each gruesome gauntlet of whirring blades and swinging maces wreaking cathartic devastation on the greenskins.

Just as before, a swarm of underdwellers rumbles through each level, heading by various routes to the glowing rifts which are their exit. If a significant number pass through, you lose. The solution, as suggested by the game's title, is to funnel them into the chokepoints you've lined with spike traps, arrow walls, springboards and meat grinders – as many as your budget allows. Then as the massed, brutish ranks pile in, you can plug any gaps personally, blasting survivors with your blunderbuss and mana grenades.

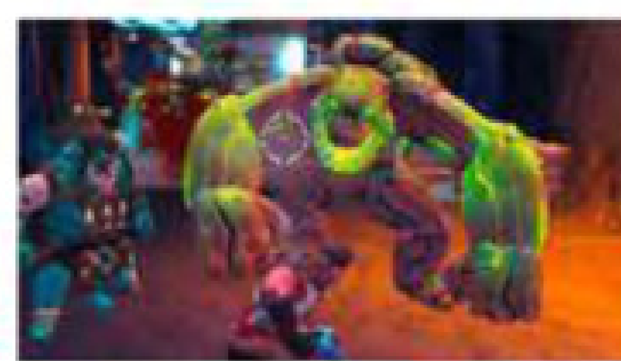
Developer Robot Entertainment has the kinaesthetics of this butchery acutely tuned – from the kick of your wide-barreled blaster to the cartwheeling physics of limp-bodied goons as they're tossed, mashed and diced in your handcrafted kill-box. The thrill of shutting down that terrifying mass of green has certainly not gone stale since the first game's release, and remains a gruesomely comic spectacle, enlivened further by the presence of another player.

A problem shared is a problem halved – often quite literally when that problem is an orc – but this proves troublesome for a campaign meant to serve both singleplayer and co-op. It never quite finds the balance on any difficulty setting, and later levels prove frustrating without a companion to cover any of the six possible approaches. Even within the levels themselves, the challenge soars and plunges: the earliest waves are sometimes the deadliest, with a miserly starting budget hobbling your defences; and yet, just a few waves later, you may snaffle enough coinage from the corpses to create a truly impassable killing field, and need never lift a finger for as long as the horde's numbers last.

Each level gives you unlimited time to prepare in advance of the horde, and then sprinkles a small number of similarly unrestricted rest periods between the crashing waves of troglodytes. Most of the time, however, you only get a breather of 15 seconds before another army ploughs into your defences – often emerging from another entrance with little warning, and sometimes from several all at once. Covering all the angles on your lonesome leaves you with some pretty tough questions: do you throw your trap budget at one entrance, and hope it takes care of itself while you face down another force with only your gun? Or do you split the traps between them, and hope that the attackers are slowed just enough that you can flit between each flashpoint and snuff the stragglers out?

Publisher Robot Entertainment
Developer In-house
Format PC
Release Out now

"The process of dismembering enemies in large numbers offers sadistic delight however you accomplish it"



PUBLIC RELATIONS
This is a game clearly designed for co-op, almost to the point of prohibiting lone players from completing the campaign on normal difficulties. So it's slightly curious, then, that its online component is so bare-bones: there is no facility for public matchmaking. You'll need to rely on the availability of Steam friends to get you through those final levels – though, given the game's ample capacity for griefing, friends would be the preferable option even if games with strangers were possible. In its favour, the game does modulate its difficulty to provide an apt challenge for players of very different levels.

The best answer seems to be not to play it by yourself. With two of you, the later levels become all they should be, the mechanisms of combat latching with the difficulty curve to create a taut tug-of war between emerging crises. As hardier creatures plunge through your defences and force you to take a more active role, you begin to recognise the additional depth the sequel brings, with a secondary playable character, the Sorceress, offering an arsenal of conjuration magic which neatly balances the original War Mage's more bullheaded approach. That said, each role remains very flexible, with the right loadout turning the loutish lunk into a mana-loaded money-making machine, or transforming the Sorceress into a melee mistress.

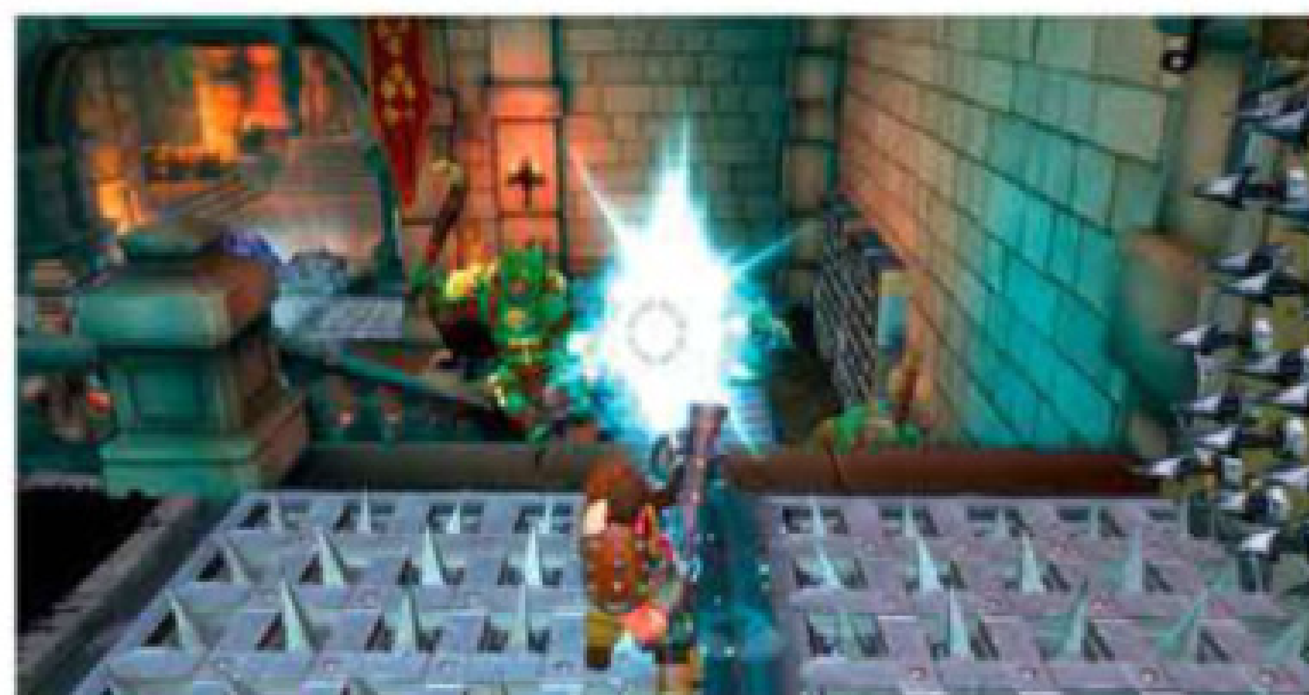
Despite their fluid roles, cooperation between players is essential, not least because in co-op the number of item slots you have is capped at six. Since your hand-weapons, traps and buff-giving trinkets all need an equipment slot, you will quickly find yourself divvying up the essentials between you, and debating the merits of your respective upgrade choices.

The skulls earned from each level are now the universal currency, offering you gradual access to the game's huge number of traps, trinkets and weapons, as well as the multiple upgrades applicable to each. Progress through this tree is a little slow, and it takes a long time to access hardware that's more effective than a combination of fully upgraded spike traps and arrow walls. Nor does the game offer any way of comparing the damage traps deal or their effective range before purchase. It's all to incentivise grinding in an alternative endless assault game-mode – which is also the best way to experience the full might of the game's bestiary. Not that many of its creatures demand diverse tactics – some have specific vulnerabilities, but as you don't know when or where they'll turn up, the cheaper catch-all damage-dealing traps always seem the best bet.

This tamps down some of the variety implied by its item shop and, in the end, tactics largely take a back seat to grenade spam. Luckily, the process of dismembering enemies in large numbers offers sadistic delight however you accomplish it, and in spite of its balance wobbles, *Orcs Must Die 2* is a frenetic blast of co-op joy – the ideal 30-minute post-pint pick-me-up, be it a step-change sequel or not.

8





RIGHT Spike-traps can be upgraded to slow enemies as well as deal damage, but like many traps, they need to reset before firing again, allowing bad guys to scamper past. Tar pits, meanwhile, bog everyone down, keeping them in the killzone



ABOVE The game is shorter on levels than its predecessor – but if you pick up the first game, quite cheaply on Steam, you unlock a further ten classic maps. Still, we'd be surprised if there wasn't a substantial DLC plan in the wings. LEFT Keeping an eye on the minimap is vital: fast-moving enemies can dash across your traps while they are resetting, making a bee-line for the rift, while winged beasties will sometimes fly silently by while you are distracted



BELOW Campaign levels max out at about a dozen waves of enemies – the endurance mode's goal is 50. By the half-way point, every possible surface has a trap on it, while the game throws its toughest creatures at you

Hybrid

Toying with the dynamics of the competitive, team-based shooter is an unexpected move for the developer of *Scribblenauts*, a game defined by its lack of prescribed solutions. Doubly so when you consider this is an experience in which you cannot even run freely, instead flitting from cover to cover using your jetpack. There is little room for emergent gameplay here, although 5th Cell's predilection for confounding expectations is clearly found in the broader canvas of the game. *Hybrid* may live up to its name in its appearance, a visual mash-up of *Halo* and *Vanquish*, but in the systems it's quite unlike anything else.

Its small stages, designed to ensure the game's relatively small three against three fights remain intense, comprise yawning gaps and the odd piece of masonry, inevitably decorated with a waist-high wall. Highlight any piece of cover within view and you may fly towards it with a tap of a button, strafing while in the air but otherwise plotting a set course toward your destination nub.

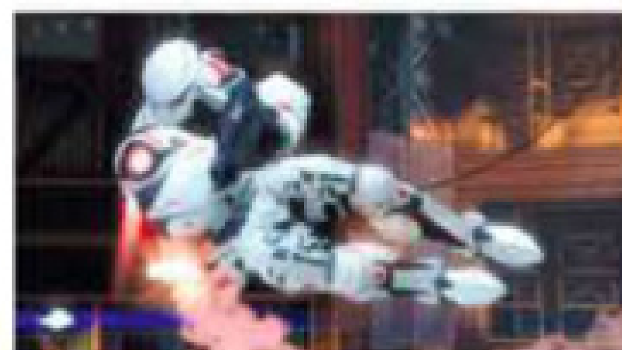
When you land you stick to cover like glue, your options limited to vaulting over to the other side, choosing a new destination or retreating to the previous one. In transit, you can shoot (although peering down the reticule will slow your flight), boost towards your target cover, or pick a new landing spot and divert your flight path accordingly. It sounds limiting, but in practice the system quickens the pace of firefights, producing a fascinating matrix of flight trails.

With each enemy takedown you earn a droid. One floats around your shoulders like an R-Type drone, picking out new enemies for you. The last of these, the Preyon – awarded for a five-streak kill – is a cyborg assassin that streaks off towards an enemy, an execution guaranteed unless its target happens to have an AI-fuddling grenade, which will turn your minion back on you. With just two weapons and one 'ability' allowed per battle, the number of 'rock, paper, scissors' combat options is engrossingly small, and the three man squad set-up encourages genuine teamplay, even for beginners.

Hybrid's meta-structure, influenced by *Steel Battalion*'s grand online war between two factions, pits the Variants against the Paladins. You must pick a side, every battle contributing towards your faction's performance that 'season'. A range of match options attempts to keep the experience fresh, but Team Deathmatch, with its weighted rewards and immediacy, proves the biggest draw, leading to a sense of repetition after extended play. This is a rich, interesting design, then, but one whose capacity for long-term competitive play is questionable.

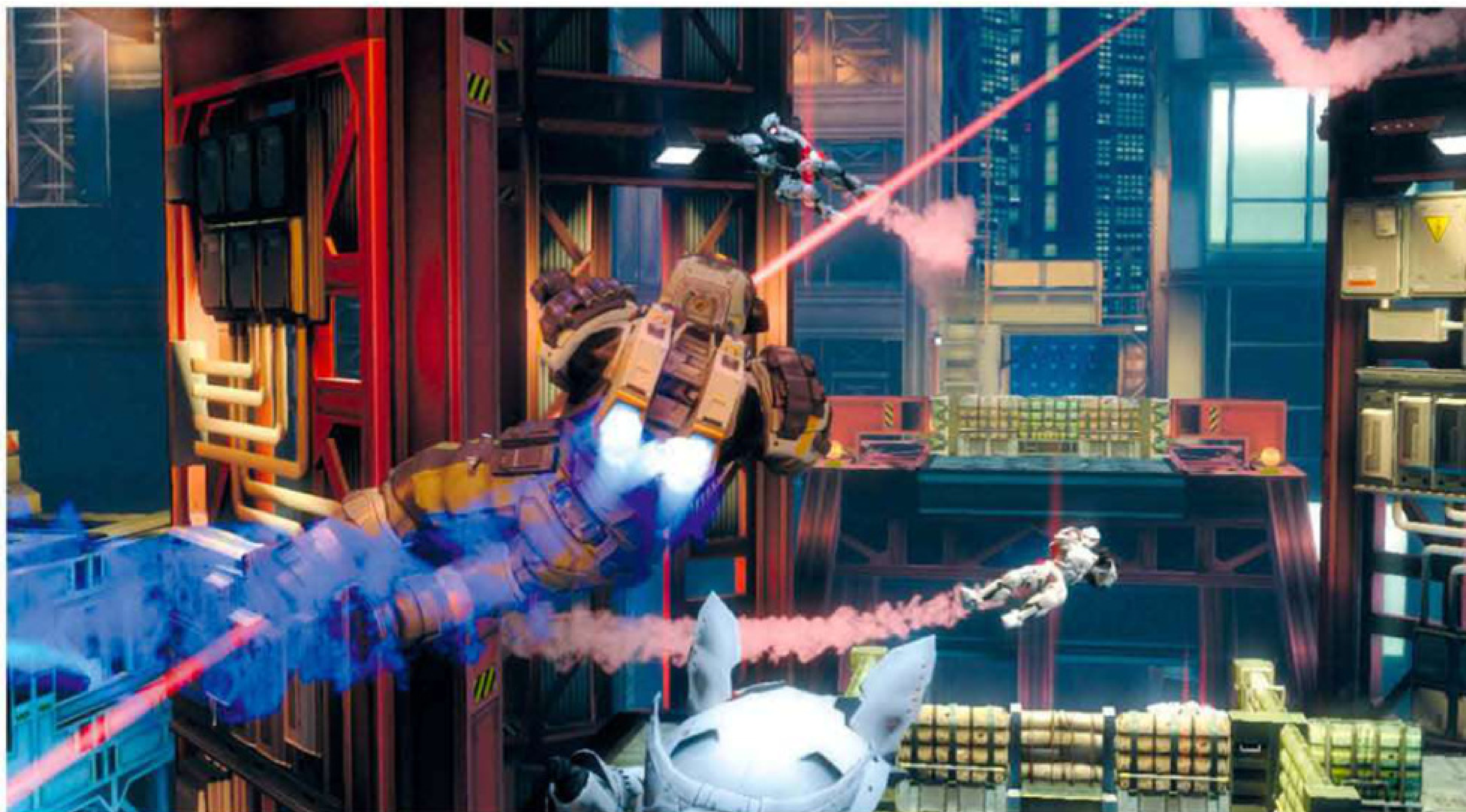
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Publisher 5th Cell
Developer In-house
Format 360
Release Out now



MONEY MATTERS
It's rare to find a console game so aggressively monetised as *Hybrid*. From first touch the game offers you every one of its weapons and armour options – for a price. You can use unlock tokens to broaden your armoury one piece at a time, but the time-poor, cash-rich player can buy up everything using real pounds and pennies. While this economy may appear to offer an unfair advantage, in most cases the new weapons merely add variety, not superiority.

Aim down your sights while flying between cover and you'll slow down, making targetting easier for you – and your enemies. Conversely, clicking the analogue stick will give you a jetpack boost to settle into cover quickly





F2P summit



26 September 2012, London





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Alex Dale, Chief Marketing Officer, King.com



Triple A on Console to Triple A on iOS
Jason Avent, Managing Director, Boss Alien

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The F2P Good and Bad
Sean Decker,Vice President, EA Play4Free



Seven Lessons from Making AION Free to Play
Carsten van Husen, CEO, Gameforge 4D



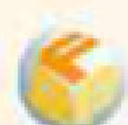
A Conversation with David Darling: Free is not enough!!
David Darling, Founder, Kwalee



Alternative Discovery Approaches
Ian Baverstock, Founder, Playfuel



The Basic Rules of F2P: 15 Simple Rules to Make Your F2P Game More Fun, More Popular and More Profitable
Nicholas Lovell, Founder, Gamesbrief



Secrets of the Global F2P Market Revealed
Pascal Zuta, CEO, Aeria Games Europe



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Chair: Alex Wiltshire, Editor, Edge Magazine

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Mr Dreamer

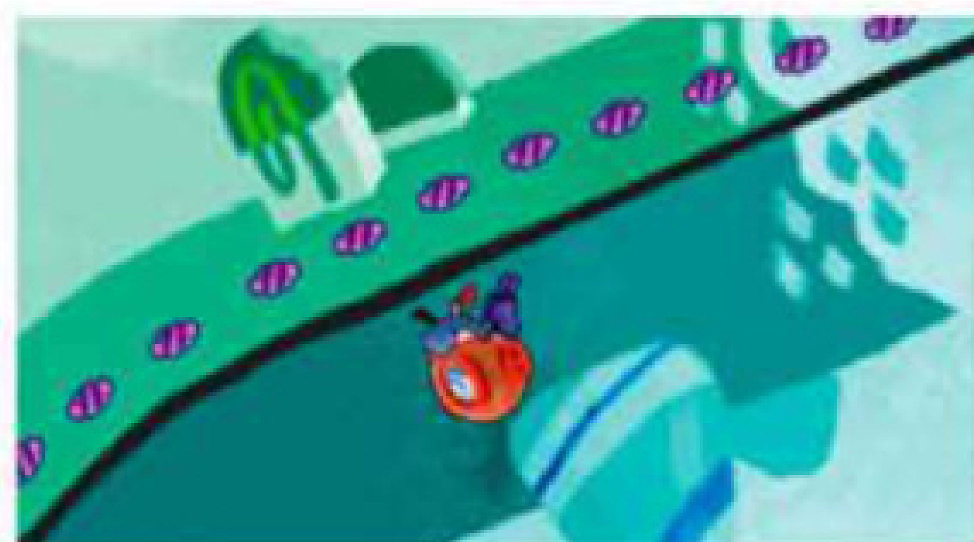
Publisher Strapped To A Meteor
Developer In-house
Format iOS
Release Out now

Many have followed in *Canabalt*'s breathless footsteps, but few have added much to the basic auto-runner format. It's not surprising: in the face of such purity, guns and upgrade systems tend to feel like a dilution rather than an evolution, while more elaborate ideas often collapse under their own weight. *Mr Dreamer*, however, manages to turn the genre upside down, by flipping its protagonist on its head. There's no jumping: instead, each tap of the screen sends you switching between either side of the game's tangled racing line.

It's a wonderful idea that never gets buried beneath gimmicks, either. When you travel *Mr Dreamer*'s strange, looping, candy-coloured fantasy lands, all you need to keep your eye on is the road ahead. There are bombs and enemies to avoid and boiled sweets to collect along the route, but most of your efforts will be spent ensuring your hero's standing the right way up as much as possible.

This last point is where the game's appeal lies, since racing on the underside of the track, while not immediately fatal, will steadily drain your dream meter, eventually chucking you back to the start screen. You'll need to constantly monitor your orientation, as each curve becomes an opportunity for impromptu disaster, and every loop-de-loop is transformed into a sweaty-palmed set-piece. The frame rate occasionally chugs, but little else can truly hold *Mr Dreamer* back. This is a confident twist on a popular genre, and a case study in how a good idea needs little embellishment.

8



Gets To The Exit

Publisher Roll7
Developer In-house
Format iOS, Android
Release Out now

Gets To The Exit is not without its problems. The art assets are tiny and unattractively fiddly, the audio is amateurish and annoying, and the difficulty curve is frustratingly uneven. Regardless of all that, the design team has hit on a puzzle mechanic that really works. While this isn't a particularly polished game, in other words, it delivers on the kind of arcade pleasures that can often render polish unnecessary.

The task of each 2D level is to get your gaggle of tiny, brainless tribesmen from A to B across a swathe of perilous terrain. Control is indirect, however, so while your team races back and forth, plummeting from ledges, hitting walls, and turning 180s, it's up to you to stay a few steps ahead of them, raising and lowering columns of land to create bridges, as if manipulating some huge geological bar chart.

With hazards such as spikes and lava to avoid – and potentially useful elements like bounce pads and little bridges to employ – it's exhilaratingly precise stuff, and it allows for a surprising degree of variation, too. Some levels are merely concerned with finding the correct heights for your various platforms, for example, while others require constant micromanagement as you shift the landscape about, keeping time with a strict sequence.

Ugly, punishing, and extremely satisfying, *Gets To The Exit* is a raw kind of fun. It's the perfect companion for a commute, and an ideal antidote to empty App Store slickness.

8



Amazing Alex

Publisher Rovio
Developer In-house
Format iOS
Release Out now

A physics-based puzzler where objects collapse, projectiles are fired, and stars are earned: it's easy to see why Rovio chose to take Snappy Touch's *Casey's Contraptions* under its wing. The rebranding process has seen the original's rougher edges sanded down, although the result isn't altogether successful: Alex makes for a rather bland host, barely featuring beyond brief appearances at the end of a stage to smile gormlessly.

Amazing Alex's inauspicious App Store debut would suggest it's unlikely to achieve the ubiquity of Rovio's avian phenomenon – but that isn't to say it's a worse game; rather, a less instantly appealing one. Each level tasks you with creating a Rube Goldberg device from a variety of objects to accomplish a simple objective: popping a balloon, bouncing a ball into a basket, or simply causing an object to hit the floor. Efficiency matters little, as long as you collect those three small stars: indeed, doing so often requires a more elaborate design, though you'll more likely happen across a clumsy but functional solution.

The most satisfying stages give you a generous toolset, but too many involve painstaking repositioning of a few items – an awkward process exacerbated by the small screen. Yet when the billiard ball lands on the mechanical boxing glove that punches the book that falls onto the scissors that cut the rope that releases the balloon that nudges the skateboard down the ramp, the swell of pride you'll feel more than compensates for the endless tinkering.

7



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Lifting the lid on the art, science, and business of making games

This issue's People, Places, Things gets underway on p114, where we catch up with indie developer and *VVVVVV* creator Terry Cavanagh and outline his remarkable career. We then delve into the grim underworld of *Stranglehold*'s Hong Kong Marketplace on p116 to explore one of the most memorable shooting galleries of gaming's recent past. Our journey continues on p118, where we ponder the significance of the golden Triforce and the foundational role it's played in the *Zelda* series. Studio Profile on p120 finds us paying a visit to NaturalMotion, which has developed the likes of *Grand Theft Auto IV*'s animation in addition to its own hugely successful iOS games. In The Making Of... on p124, we turn our gaze to *Limbo*, detailing how creative director Arnt Jensen and his Copenhagen studio Playdead assembled its sublimely dark platformer. Switching gears from monochrome to vivid psychedelic hues, The Art Of... on p128 revels in the procedurally generated charms of indie MMOG *Love*, which reminds us of the virtues of impressionism. As always, we let our Create columnists have the final word, with designer Tadhg Kelly (p132) urging us to stress gaming's redeeming qualities to mainstream sceptics, while Valve's Clint Hocking (p134) studies *Minecraft*'s special recipe. Then Randy Smith (p136) delivers the second instalment of his *Waking Mars* post-mortem, and James Leach (p138) argues that replaying games you've already finished can be rewarding for reasons far beyond nostalgia.

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The business section of **Edge**'s Web site



What is the Triforce, why does Link want it, and is it worth fighting for anyway? Find out on p118

People

TERRY CAVANAGH

Is one of indie development's flightiest talents starting to settle down?



Cavanagh often teams up with flatmate and *English Country Tune* maker Stephen Lavelle. "When we work together, we often take more risks than we would on our own"

Terry Cavanagh's probably the closest thing the indie development scene has to its own Mark Rothko. The 28-year-old designer makes brooding, claustrophobic, and rather stark games, using simple tools and limited palettes – and they all seem to hinge on a single idea. It's a surprise, then, to learn that his favourite game of all time is *Final Fantasy VII*, Square's 1997 rambling RPG. "People always seem shocked by that," laughs Cavanagh, who was born in Ireland and now lives in Cambridge, "but *Final Fantasy VII* was the game that made me want to be a game designer, and I think the reason was that it introduced me to a lot of new ideas I'd never seen before.

"I'm pretty sure that it was the first RPG I'd ever played," he continues. "My cousin had just got a PlayStation, and before that I'd only played games on the Commodore 64 and on a friend's Sega Genesis. To encounter this whole new genre was a pretty big thing. Then to encounter such an obliquely story-driven game was also totally new for me. It's probably seen as being quite clichéd now, but the game's about mind control and clones and all these things I'd never really seen stories tackle. You really get the impression when you play that game that it was trying to push the boundaries. It just felt like a huge step forward, and it was a massive thing for me to see that games could be like this. It was a huge thing to see that they could have so many ambitions."

'Ambition' is a word that crops up quite a lot whenever Cavanagh talks about games; it's a quality that's clearly very important to him, even if he ultimately struggles to define exactly what he means by it. Ask him about *VVVVVV* – the gravity-switching platformer that stands today as his most mainstream success – and he'll say that, while it's the biggest game he's ever made, it's a shame that it isn't really the most, well, ambitious thing in the world.

"To me now, *VVVVVV* is almost an indulgence," he laughs. "It's a game I was making because I enjoyed the process of making it so much. I got into it in a big way and I loved the process of coming up with new ideas for it, but I don't think *VVVVVV* really does anything hugely new. It's a refinement and I like to think it's a well-designed game, but it's not really pushing things forward very much. Ambition's about putting part of yourself into the game, making it really personal – and that doesn't mean it has to be some dull art game, either. I'm incredibly proud of *VVVVVV*, but I hope ten years from now, when I'm looking back on some of the other games I've made, that I'm known for more ambitious things than that."

Looking back over just the last four years – the period since Cavanagh left his job at a bank to become a full-time game developer – he's already become known for his prodigious output, at least. On his website, in a note accompanying his 2010 portfolio, he admits that he worked on over 54 different games that year. This is how he has approached design up until now – sketching out an idea, and then seeing if it grabs him.

"When I say I worked on 54 games in 2010, 90 per cent of those weren't finished," he cautions. "I usually get really attached to any idea I work on for more than a day or two. I start to think of it as a really big thing. Normally, though, if I work on it for more than that, it starts to become clear whether it's going to work or not."

When talking about the games that he actually completes, he often says the same sort of thing: he was messing around and "got carried away with it", or "it just took over". Creativity for Cavanagh seems to be a dynamic, almost intoxicating force. He often makes himself sound powerless in its presence.

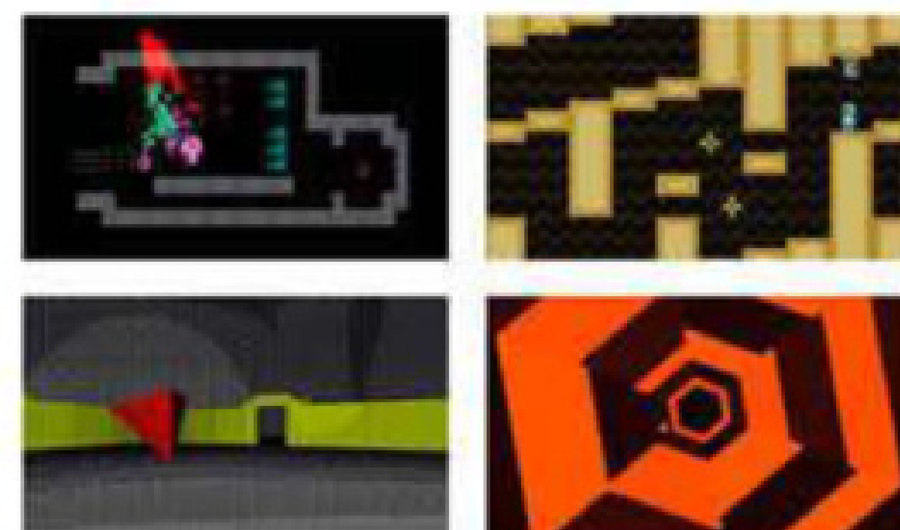
"I'm incredibly proud of VVVVVV, but I hope in ten years I'm known for more ambitious things than that"

That's not to say that Cavanagh's games don't have distinctive elements in common. Many of them, like *Pathways* and the collaborative multiplayer puzzler *At A Distance*, focus on unique approaches to interactive storytelling, moving in close to explore the peculiar difficulties of human communication. Others, meanwhile, go in completely the opposite direction, offering pared-back arcade action with next to no extraneous elements.

"Even when I was a teenager, making games in QBasic, I was making things that were very pure action games," says Cavanagh. "Minimal, no-bullshitting arcade experiences. Over the years for jams, competitions – any excuse – I'd make some games that touched on that same sort of feeling. I made a game called *Self Destruct* that's about flying really, really fast and absorbing bullets and then flinging them out again. It's super chaotic, and it usually lasts about 20 seconds. I made another game called *Bullet Time* that's even faster and even more chaotic, and even purer in some ways."

CV

URL www.distractionware.com
Softography *XOLDIERS (2008), Don't Look Back (2009), VVVVVV (2010), At A Distance (2011), Hexagon (2012)*



Cavanagh has spent a large part of 2012 working on this kind of game, after creating a brutally tough action puzzler called *Hexagon*, in which the player tries to escape from a maze as its luminous walls close in.

"I've just finished *Super Hexagon*, actually, which is a game I really had to make," he says. "The reason I do these sorts of games is that I feel like I'm in a different headspace, and that's where I am with this one. The original *Hexagon* was made in a couple of hours and, after I made it, I realised I wanted to take longer to do it properly for once. I knew there was something there that I hadn't explored and that I kept coming back to. Instead of the usual way I work – where I overthink everything and obsess about details – this is more like intuition, and every decision is just what feels good. What feels good drives everything. *Super Hexagon* is me taking that feeling and trying to do it right, over a longer period. It feels like the end-point of one of these strands of specific ideas I tend to work in: it's where some of these games were going."

Cavanagh has already put four months' work into readying *Super Hexagon* for iOS, and he admits that it's part of a wider trend, as he increasingly focuses on bigger projects that take a little more planning. With an RPG called *Nexus City* on the way – it's a long-standing collaboration with the designer Jonas Kyratzes – and another game already pencilled in once that one's finished, the inveterate prototypist might just be starting to settle down somewhat.

"Things are changing a little," Cavanagh admits. "I used to emerge from a game jam with eight fairly small, finished games – they'd all be ridiculous, but it was rewarding to do. The last one I went to, I came away with just two, and neither of them are finished yet." He pauses. "But I do think they could both be good games if I finished them properly – and I'm happier with them than with all those eight small games." ■

Places

HONG KONG MARKETPLACE

Stranglehold's home turf offers cinematic gaming at its most satisfying



Break down the right door in the marketplace and you'll find an empty cinema screening footage from *The Wheelman*. Poor old Midway Newcastle

From *John Woo Presents Stranglehold*
Developer Midway Chicago/Tiger Hill
Origin US
Release 2007

Beneath the glass towers and megacorp logos that dominate *Stranglehold*'s take on the Hong Kong skyline, you'll find the lanterns and birdcages of a marketplace. It's an old world tucked inside a new one, and the perfect home for a game that delivers ancient pleasures through cutting-edge tech.

Cutting edge for 2007 anyway, the year of *Stranglehold*'s release. An interactive sequel to John Woo's shoot 'em up flick Hard Boiled, the game was also the first current-gen action title from Midway Chicago, the studio behind *Psi-Ops: The Mindgate Conspiracy*. With roots going all the way back to *Robotron: 2084*, this developer had always seemed to yearn to unleash messy chaos as bullets flew and environments shattered. With *Stranglehold*, thanks to a generational leap in physics, animation and particle systems, it finally could. Just look around the market: as ever, there are propane tanks to explode and wooden crates to smash, but there are also watermelons, TV sets, and ornate statues to rip apart with hot lead. Broken glass, splintered electronics, pulped fruit: of all the games ever made, *Stranglehold* is the one you'd least enjoy clearing up after.

As with Hard Boiled, it's clear that *Stranglehold*'s entire world has been designed around the stylish figure of Inspector 'Tequila' Yuen. Each table is the perfect height for him to vault over, while each spawn point lurks beneath neon signs that he can shoot down to cleave foes in two. Tequila's not the only star, however. The world has been designed around John Woo, too, which might explain why every alley is littered with cooing doves primed to take flight, and every buttress is employed not just for the cover it provides the supercop, but for the pleasure of watching the concrete and rebars give way as he dives back into the fray, twin guns blazing.

Woo is everywhere in *Stranglehold*, then, even before he pops up behind the counter at the unlock shop, and that poses an interesting question: how do you recreate his unique approach to cinema in a videogame? How do you balance the choreography and the carnage while leaving enough room for the player? Some solutions are obvious, such as set-piece gun fights that see you involved in comically overpopulated Mexican standoffs, and melodramatic cutscenes where the camera circles and probes while men chew matchsticks and talk about honour. Beneath that, though, there's a far deeper understanding at work. Midway recognises that a John Woo videogame should feel like *Burnout* with guns. *Stranglehold* is a shooter with a racing line, in other words, and the market is its best circuit.



***Stranglehold*'s linear but filled with detail, from the bugs shimmering around exposed bulbs to the origami cranes you collect**

It's also the only circuit you really need. The rest of the game might allow you to dismantle dinosaurs and bust up a gigantic casino, but this opening level showcases the action at its purest and least compromised. Here you'll find an environment that consistently rewards stylish shooting, that you can tread in its entirety without wasting a single bullet. There are open plazas where the geometry can be employed to deadly effect as scaffolding falls and telegraph poles cut gangsters in half, and there are fences to destroy with buckshot blasts, which will send the creeps cowering behind them cartwheeling into trestle tables laden with roast pork.

This is a world itching to come apart: ceramic tiles turn to powder, cash registers spill Hong Kong dollars

Best of all, there are sequences where everything flows together, where a dash along a metal railing sees you landing air-con units on top of enemies before jumping onto a pushcart and rolling around the narrow streets as you shotgun the next wave of villains in the knees. As for the climax, the tea house waiting for you at the end of this dirty sprawl presents an open space that defies even the most timid of players to hunker down and proceed with caution. It's an arena that only works if you approach with flair, swinging between lanterns, dancing over banisters, sliding across the floor and then rolling on your belly. This is a world itching to come apart: ceramic tiling turns to powder, cash registers spill Hong Kong dollars, and all the while a prompt repeats the *Stranglehold* mantra, 'LT to dive, RT to shoot'.

It helps that most of the marketplace's action unfolds before you've learned too many of the game's showier tricks, which see you flinging precision-aimed bullets at enemies, or spinning on the spot and spitting lead while doves scatter into the air. These are decent specials if you're ploughing through the later levels, perhaps, but stripping them away keeps *Stranglehold*'s opening scenes honest. It ensures that all the game has to rely on for its first hour or so is that sepia-tinged slow motion (borrowed, of course, from *Max Payne*), and a fearless hero who moves like a gymnast. Before the more elaborate set-pieces arrive, *Stranglehold* is almost as pure as the coin-op blasters Midway made its name with. From the smart drum roll that signifies an area's been cleared to the bonuses that stack up as you settle into the carnage, it's an adventure that values twitch skills above all else.

This twitchiness might outstrip *Stranglehold*'s storytelling ambitions, but that doesn't mean it has forgotten its cinematic roots. If anything, it took the company behind cash-guzzlers such as *Defender* to realise how fitting it would be to combine an arcade sensibility with Woo's balletic bloodletting. Like Hard Boiled, *Stranglehold* is brought to life by the battle between order and chaos. In the case of its greatest level, the fight's not over until the entire landscape's been consumed. ■

Things

THE TRIFORCE

The magical draw of gaming's greatest MacGuffin



By the time of 1991's *A Link To The Past*, the Triforce had three components, but it was still a two-dimensional representation of a geometric form

From *The Legend Of Zelda* series
Developer Nintendo
Origin Japan
Debut 1986

When it comes to fantasy-based videogames, it's remarkable how often the cosmic balance hangs not on complex environmental and geopolitical forces in conflict – though these may be present as window dressing – but on the fate of one magical MacGuffin. It could be an orb, a gem or an ancient sword. It doesn't really matter as long as it will somehow resolve the outwardly apocalyptic situation in which the hero suddenly finds themselves playing a central role.

It's a curious convention to have your deus ex machina sitting in plain view from the start of the story, but it's easy to understand why this appeals to both designers and players. It takes a lot more work and imagination to elaborate a credible global threat than it does to designate a random sparkly item as the ill-defined linchpin of the universe and then gravely imperil it. And it's a keen escapist pleasure to quit our real world of unsolvable ambient menace for a virtual one of clearer allegiances and direr perils, secure in the knowledge that finding the sacred doodad will set everything right until the sequel.

The *Final Fantasy* series is this device's most diligent abuser, taking it to an almost nihilistic extent, as though the whole human saga might just deserve to nonsensically topple down like a game of Jenga upon the removal of some magic crystal. Though often cloaked in allegories of nature or morality, this little clod of matter holding everything up feels like a secular version of God. It's the ineffable quantity that fills the gaps in rationality, defines right and wrong, and glosses over everything that doesn't make sense. If not God, it's at least the Higgs boson of game cosmology.

Of all the world-saving baubles scattered about, the most visually iconic and symbolically potent one was forged not as a representation of a weapon or mineral, but as a pure geometric shape — a triangle. When we saw it first, it was yellow, except when lifted into the air, which would cause it to flash blue as if catching the light. Was it flat, or were we seeing one plane of a form that had depth? Was it made of metal, or solidified energy? Was it heavy? In *The Legend Of Zelda*, it was simply a "golden triangle possessing mystical powers", and it was the only thing that could save Hyrule. We had to have it. We seek it still.

Even if you've been playing the first game for 25 years, you might be shaky on the specifics of its sparse mythology, which are gleaned more from the instruction manual than the game itself. In short, 'Prince Of Darkness' Ganon steals the Triforce Of Power. To prevent him from acquiring its counterpart, the Triforce Of Wisdom, Princess Zelda breaks it into eight smaller triangles and hides them in dungeons. Link must find the pieces and rebuild the Triforce Of Wisdom to challenge Ganon and reclaim the Triforce Of Power.



In *Ocarina Of Time*, Triforce's full 3D shape was finally revealed, changing it from a mysterious symbol to a more mundane object

> In The Legend Of Zelda, it was simply a "golden triangle possessing mystical powers". We had to have it

No hint is given that these two mystic triangles have any defined origins, properties or powers — they are almost completely symbols in a morality play. Evil seeks power, which should only be wielded by good in concert with wisdom. Furthermore, evil seeks imbalance, while good defends order. With this idea of the world as an equilibrium of opposing abstract forces set in place, it was only natural to add the Triforce Of Courage in *The Adventure Of Link*, rounding out the concept of the trinity to a fuller degree.

The result had an elegant profile: three identical triangles stacked in a pyramid with another inverted one implied in the centre, and it has stayed that way to this day. Someone knew better than to keep adding Triforces until we had to go questing for the Triforce Of Punctuality. Still, in subsequent games, the construct's simplicity started to sink under leaden interpretations. In *A Link To The Past*, it was revealed that each piece was a divine manifestation of a different goddess, and the Triforce could also grant wishes.

By *Ocarina Of Time*, the Triforce sounded like something Chris Claremont could have cooked up in his laborious late-'80s X-Men comics, with convenient magical mechanics over-explained until they seemed both fussy and vague. We learned that simply being touched by someone with an unbalanced heart causes the Triforce to shatter, with the lopsided person keeping the piece he craves most, while the other two hide themselves in more stable hearts. Or something.

The Triforce regained some of its original mythic force in later games, where it appears incidentally, perhaps just shown in an emblem above a gate, like a relic from another age. The focus returns to the essential form of the triangle, an ancient device of maths and magic that makes balance visible. It's the closed shape you can draw with the fewest straight lines. When it's equilateral, its external angles add up to 360 degrees, an inside-out circle. As a world-saving device, it courts an easy Christian reading, too: salvation through a trinity that is also one.

But the triangle also contains all of the other trinities through which we filter the world. Human, beast and earth. White, black and gray. Yes, no and maybe. Birth, life and death. Maiden, mother and crone. Father, mother and child. Mind, body and soul. Three primary colours. Three chances. Three Fates. We can intuit all of this in the shape itself, unadorned with the game's fiction. And it's still a thrill to see Link raise it above his head in triumph – a glowing three-sided mystery, inscrutable yet brimming with meaning. ■

STUDIO PROFILE

NaturalMotion

How a budding middleware developer suddenly became one of the biggest deals in mobile gaming



From left: Torsten Reil, CEO and co-founder; Barclay Deeming, VP of games; Struan Robertson, product director at Oxford studio NaturalMotion

Back in 2008, NaturalMotion's profile was skyrocketing, helped in no small part by its work on *GTAIV*. The software developer's procedural animation technology, Euphoria – which enabled dynamic animation on the fly of multiple 3D figures – ensured that the population of Liberty City felt as alive as the city itself. People stumbled believably when shoved, pin-wheeled horribly to the pavement when clipped by a car, and staggered utterly convincingly out of local bars. As advertisements go, it couldn't be bettered; after a shaky false start with a cancelled Indiana Jones title, the biggest game of the year was now showcasing the Oxford studio's tech.

For many software developers, the obvious next step would be to wait for more clients to call. Founded in 2001 by CEO **Torsten Reil**, who realised that his research on human and animal movement for the University Of Oxford's zoology department could have commercial applications, NaturalMotion had built up a diverse suite of technologies by 2008. As well as the procedural generation of Euphoria, it had game animation engine Morpheme (the later incarnations of which would be used by Ninja Theory in *Enslaved*) and Endorphin – a technology that provided "virtual stuntmen" for films. Reil, however, didn't want NaturalMotion to be simply in the business of licensing tech for other people's creative endeavours. He wanted to make games too.

"With this technology, there were whole game genres we could do differently, and we felt that we had a pretty good handle on how they could be done", Reil explains. It was rough, full contact sports games that the studio turned to first – the world of scrums, tackles and dives was particularly suited to Euphoria's animations. So work began on *Backbreaker*, an American football game where everything is simulated, every player interaction unique.

A switch to game development meant hiring a new team, since NM couldn't spare experts on the tech side, not with technology to work on and clients to provide for. "It took us quite a long time to do it", Reil admits. "We did it with quite a small team: six people, and then 12 at peak, which was quite small for a next-gen team at the time."

Backbreaker was released in 2010 on PS3 and 360, to mixed reviews. Some less positive appraisals suggested it was more advertisement for Euphoria than a game, a suggestion that



Despite being split into two distinct teams, NaturalMotion feels like a single studio, with both aware of the other's work

causes Reil to bristle even now. "It kind of annoyed us that people thought it was a tech demo", he says. "It wasn't a tech demo. We took it very seriously. The tech demos are the games that had already been published. Games such as *GTAIV* speak for the technology, and we didn't need to do other games to show people."

But if success was modest on console, *Backbreaker* fared better elsewhere. Midway through development, the studio realised that the iPhone 3GS was capable of running its animation engine, Morpheme, so work began on a simplified port. It was a pretty left-field manoeuvre. The procedural generation offered by Euphoria was the more innovative, disruptive technology, and after its debut in *GTAIV*, NaturalMotion was well placed to continue to showcase its capability with further console releases. That said, Morpheme was capable of producing animations of better quality than anything seen on iOS thus far, so the studio wanted to capitalise on this gap.

"We literally got people from the street – people who used iPhones, but not necessarily for gaming"

"We thought it would be great to combine high quality assets and graphics and visuals, particularly animation, together with gaming that everyone could pick up", explains Reil.

Mobile gaming brought its own learning curve – users less accustomed to gaming than console owners needed clear, simple UIs, for a start. "We literally got people from the street – people who used iPhones, but not necessarily for gaming. We gave them the game, and I remember the first usability test out of ten, 'How much do you enjoy the game?' scored four", Reil recalls, laughing.

The mobile device game was simpler than its console brother, focusing on the instant action of arcade-like point scoring mode Tackle Alley – a minigame in the console release. *Backbreaker Football: Tackle Alley*'s iOS release pipped the console version's debut by a number of months, and the mobile game went on to outperform the Euphoria-powered sibling. To date, *Backbreaker* on iOS has been downloaded over 5,500,000 times, and – in contrast to the console version's reception – user reviews are glowing.



Founded 2001
Employees 160
Key staff Torsten Reil (founder, CEO), Barclay Deeming (VP Games), Struan Robertson (product director)
URL www.naturalmotion.com
Current project Unannounced
Selected Softography *Backbreaker Football, Icebreaker, My Horse, CSR Racing*

Backbreaker Football came to define the blueprint for NaturalMotion's subsequent games: the combination of Morpheme-powered graphics and tight gameplay loops can be found in *Backbreaker*'s sequel; the hockey-themed *Icebreaker*, and even equestrian pet simulation *My Horse*. And despite the popularity of graphically simple titles on iOS, NaturalMotion attributes much of its games success to the animation.

"From the very beginning", explains VP of games, **Barclay Deeming**, "especially with the iPhone version, we had these word-of-mouth moments where players think 'This looks amazing', and they want to show it to their friend. That's why we have the replays in *Backbreaker* – so that, you know, we would imagine a kid at school saying 'Oh, check this out!' We wanted to games to spread virally that way."

This viral, over-the-shoulder appeal makes smartphones and other mobile devices a natural home for NaturalMotion's games, and Reil acknowledges that the studio is now no longer interested in making traditional console games.

"Obviously for our technology side, we are super interested in console, because those are our customers, but for us ourselves creating IP and developing our publishing business, iOS is definitely our only platform", he reveals. "Firstly, it has a large installed base and there isn't a lot of fragmentation, so in that sense it's more like a console. Secondly, we believe there's a huge





***CSR Racing* (left) is the culmination of everything NaturalMotion has learnt on iOS since the release of *Backbreaker Football: Tackle Alley* (above). Its gameplay comes in short, compulsive bursts, linked to a free-to-play business model that ensures more players will experience them**

disruption in the market right now, which gives us an opportunity to innovate."

It's hard to get Reil to reminisce fondly about his experience of console publishing. "Dealing with retailers was a pain in the arse – an absolute pain in the arse, and I don't want to do it again. And dealing with all the middlemen involved in general retail was difficult, getting shelf space for the game was a nightmare, when you find there are so many vested interests already, there are other publishers dominating and determining what the shelf space is, it's really hard to get in," he says. "As a company who have a lot of passion for their games, seeing all of those blocks, it was a scarring experience, to put it charitably. And, you know, that's not true of iOS."

As well as iOS, the studio has embraced the free-to-play model, too, starting with *My Horse*. "We did five paid games first, and the average turnaround investment for our paid games was five times, so they were quite profitable, and it looked like quite a good business," explains Reil, "But it was becoming increasingly clear at the beginning of 2010 that F2P was a superior business model, because now the game is free you can use the game itself as an ad – people can download it for free, so there's no barrier. That's where word-of-mouth moments work really well."

"If you really push for quality as a developer or a publisher, then Apple will notice your game"

Indeed, NaturalMotion's increasing confidence with – and success on – the App Store has culminated in the release of *CSR Racing*, a street racer developed by Boss Alien that's notable for containing none of the human animations for which the studio is renowned. Its tap-based racing mechanics and shrewd monetisation are a reflection of the lessons learned over the past four years. "There's no fat on there," says **Struan Robertson**, product director. "Everything is drilled down to that core experience of playing those races, improving your car and beating faster and faster opponents as you go. What we've we learned from *My Horse* and *CSR* is that it's not about horses [or cars], it's about user behaviour. What can we learn from that game that we can then put into this game, and likewise, we were talking about *CSR Racing*, and the player model in there. Our thinking has moved on again, and there's stuff there we'd change for the next game. Using knowledge from the car game to do games that aren't necessarily about cars."

CSR is released the day we visit the studio, and there's a palpable sense of pride and nervous expectation as Deeming and Robertson occasionally rush to the monitors to check analytics. They needn't have worried – *CSR* reached the peak of the App Store's highest grossing charts within days, boosted, perhaps, by its appearance at Apple's Worldwide Developer's Conference earlier in the month. "If you really push for quality as a developer or a publisher, and really really push, then Apple will notice your game", explains Reil. "But we never assume that Apple is going to take an interest. They call you."

The studio – located in North Oxford's affluent Jericho, is evenly split between the technical and game design team – who work under the banner of NaturalMotion Games. Their work is separate, but the only clue that we're going from gaming to technical development as you walk the office floor is the sudden absence of concept art on the walls. While the teams don't work together on individual projects, they benefit from being under the same roof.

"There's a reasonable amount of crossover in terms of some of the skill sets," says Deeming. "And in terms of our ideas and developmental technology, there's a lot of chat and discussion, and there's a great deal of interest from both sides of the company in what the other side is doing".

"There's a lot of respect from both sides", continues Robertson. "There's a lot of socialising as well. I think when you're out of the building, no one considers us to be two separate companies." It is, however, important to keep some degree of separation, claims Reil. "We made sure that the teams are ring-fenced, so that when our technology customers feel they needed support, the tech team isn't working on games". It's indicative of a continued commitment to the technical side of the business, which has seen Morpheme and Euphoria appear within a host of console releases even as NaturalMotion has been building up its iOS catalogue – most recently, Euphoria ensured Brazilian gangsters staggered back realistically from gunshot wounds in *Max Payne 3*. Indeed, Rockstar has continued to be one of the most enthusiastic clients. "Rockstar always has a desire to do something new, and to do something that wows people and gives them something that they haven't seen before", says Reil. "And I think, you know, that Euphoria actually panned out that way. Euphoria was a different way to have characters move, and to make them much more interactive, and surprising."

One place Euphoria hasn't appeared, however, is on iOS. Reil is cagey when asked about it, but it seems likely that a game featuring truly procedurally generated animations will appear on an Apple device eventually. "The full-on simulation of Euphoria on iPhone, we haven't shown the public yet. It doesn't mean that it hasn't impacted our design", he concedes. In the meantime, however, NaturalMotion is more concerned with the matter of an imminent office move to a new location in central Oxford, as well as closely monitoring *CSR*'s fortunes. The studio also recently raised $11 million in venture capital, which it'll be using for further expansion.

With success in two very different fields, NaturalMotion is in a position to rest on its laurels once more. Instead, Reil and his team have decided to aim even higher. "We want to be one of the leading, if not the leading next-generation game publisher. We don't want to be a small developer that does a couple of games. We think there's a huge opportunity now to bring incredibly high-end content to a huge number of users. So that's our ambition." ■

Q&A



Torsten Reil
CEO

When using procedurally driven animation, is it possible to undermine a game system built around rigid, predictable rules?
There is, and you have to find the right balance. I think that initially [with *Backbreaker*] there was a pure vision that everything should be procedural, but I think the more we learned and the more we used it in-game, both with our testers as well as ourselves, we realised you have to find the right balance. It's a lot about how much you loosen the reins – in certain situations in the game there's no user input whatsoever and you can go crazy as long as the game allows it. You can let the simulation unfold. If you have user input, you want to make sure that exactly the things that you've just mentioned happen, so that you have outputs precisely controlled rather than having lots of external factors influencing them. A huge part of the development of our technology over the last two or three years or so has been enabling that boundary to shift dynamically in the game so that we can dial up the user with specific one-to-one input, or even animations, and then haul that up to simulation whenever required.

Is the problem player expectation? Or do games need a certain amount of predictability for game design to work?
Yeah, if you look at American football as an example. So what you would want, say for a quarterback, is that if a quarterback passes the ball to another player, if the quarterback is not interfered with whatsoever, you want to make sure that the animation shows exactly what the user expects, and that it's an instant reaction. It needs to feel really snappy. It's exactly the same with running. If you trip, you want that to happen naturalistically. But we also found that people want to very quickly be able to control the character again. We can't then have the character stumble for three or four seconds afterwards. Basically for 0.8 seconds maximum – maybe less than that. These are the things that we've learned.

Do you ever come across any resistance to procedurally driven animation?
Yeah, definitely at the beginning there was a lot of resistance. I remember we had our first meetings back then with Acclaim, and were basically laughed out of the studio. People didn't think it was going to work, and it took us a while, there was definitely resistance. The games industry is very traditional, despite it being so cutting edge. And you can understand why, right, because, as an animator, if you introduce other works that replace animation, that's problematic. If as a texture artist you find technologies that generate textures, and you have to re-tool and re-learn everything, then that's problematic. The same thing is true for pretty much anything where the CPU takes over. So I understood that there was that kind of sentiment, but that's changing. That's changed quite a lot, particularly with some companies kind of charging ahead so far, such as Rockstar, I think people are seeing different ways of doing things.





Max Payne 3 **(showcased above) is the most recent game to show off Euporia's dynamic animation. The tech hasn't hit iOS yet, but it's only a matter of time**

THE MAKING OF…

Limbo

With its monochrome visuals and otherworldly story, Limbo is a game about death that brought an indie studio to life



Limbo's monochrome landscape of fog and shadows owes a debt to German expressionism. Its collision of mechanical elements with gloomy forests also raises niggling questions about the true nature of this odd world

Publisher Microsoft (XBLA)/Playdead
Developer Playdead
Format 360, Mac, PS3, PC
Origin Denmark
Debut July 2010

Artists are often hit by inspiration when they least expect it. Take Swedish writer **Astrid Lindgren**, who was travelling past a lake on a wintry day in 1972. As a pink light shimmered over the water, she saw something fantastic, "a kind of vision of the dawning light of humanity… I felt something was ignited. 'This may turn into something,' I thought."

What it led to was The Brothers Lionheart, her 1973 children's fantasy novel about two brothers who are reunited after their deaths in a faraway land. It became a bestseller in Scandinavia. And among those who read it in the '70s was a Danish kid named **Arnt Jensen**.

At the time, the future creator of *Limbo* was living on a farm in Jutland. "My parents weren't farmers," he explains, "but they had a small farm with a lot of animals for fun." Little Arnt, shy and quiet, used to like wandering off into the nearby woods. He'd spend hours following the stream that ran between the trees, often dropping strange insects and leaves into it and following them as the current swept them downstream. "I always had this thing for small animals and parasites – I hated them, even as a child," he remembers.

Among the trees he felt a mixture of freedom and fear. The silence there was pervasive, and he felt close not only to life, but also to death. "People like The Brothers Grimm, Astrid Lindgren and Tove Jansson [who wrote The Moomins] were responsible for a lot of my childhood memories. They dared to write about death in a much heavier way than people do today."

When Jensen grew up, he joined IO Interactive as a concept artist. One day in '04, inspiration hit and he started sketching. Like Lindgren on her fateful journey, he felt he was on to something. "I just picked up a pencil and drew a secret place. I've still got the drawing, and I put it on the first web page I did. I started drawing it without a character – there's no boy in it. There's just a beach and a dark cave that you might want to explore."

It would be the first of many sketches of this odd monochrome landscape. Right from the beginning, he knew it was a game. Possibly a point-and-click adventure title, he thought. Something low-tech that he could program himself. Like his childhood self in the woods, he saw the process as a solitary adventure, but in this he was wrong – making *Limbo* wasn't a path that he was destined to walk alone.




Arnt Jensen (left) worked on *Freedom Fighters* and *Hitman 2* at IO; Dino Patti (right) held various roles at tech companies

Jensen isn't a natural interviewee. Shy and hesitant, it's pretty obvious he doesn't like talking to strangers, often giving clipped, vague answers. At one point – after being asked to pick a moment from the game that illuminates *Limbo*'s puzzle design – the phone line to Copenhagen goes dead for so long that we think we've been cut off. Instead, Jensen's merely pondering, considering his answer (which never quite materialises). In his own words, he's a man who thinks too much. "Yeah, way too much. It takes me a couple of days to decide anything."

Imagine, then, how he must felt in 2006 when his inbox was flooded by potential business partners. After spending two years trying to build a prototype using Visual Basic, Jensen had made a concept video and put it online. He'd hoped it would help him find a programmer who could breathe life into his vision. Instead, the video went viral. With its monochrome visuals and sense of otherworldliness, *Limbo* stood out from the crowd. Publishers flocked to the shy Dane.

"I just picked up a pencil and drew a secret place. I've still got the drawing… there's no boy in it"

"I got very scared by all these people contacting me," recalls Jensen. "I had mail from publishers all round the world. It was a one-man project at the time, and it felt like they wanted to control it and be part of it. I was so scared that people would take it away from me and make it more commercialised."

Among the emails was a request from **Dino Patti**. Suave and confident, he's the opposite of the reclusive artist. Patti had seen the trailer and guessed what Jensen might need – not just from a programmer but from a business partner.

When they met in the living room of Jensen's Copenhagen apartment, Patti instantly realised how different they were. "Arnt definitely thinks more about things than many people, and I tend to have an easier time just doing stuff. Both things have strengths and weaknesses. Arnt makes good choices and I get more done."

For Jensen, Patti's ability to forge ahead was exactly what he needed – especially when it came to fielding publishers' requests. "It let me dare to say no to people. In the first year there was a lot of just saying 'No, no, no, no, no, no.'"

Together they built Playdead, sourcing its funding from investors and grants from the Danish government – the first time that a videogame had been given money under such schemes in the country. Patti came into his own as the business brain of the company, insulating his colleague from the idiocy of some of their investors.

"We had most of the investor clichés you can think of," Patti explains with a weary laugh. "They had huge [inferiority] complexes, and they tried to control the company with no usable knowledge or respect for us. The funniest suggestion I can remember was when Microsoft raised a flag about the death of the boy; one of the investors suggested we make him appear older by giving him a moustache."

Buoyed with fresh cash, Playdead moved into its first office on January 1, 2007. "It was 11 metres square and smelled pretty rotten," recalls Patti. Two years later, it moved into its current offices in the centre of Copenhagen – a cosy space on the fifth floor of an old apartment building with views over the city's rooftops.

Between moves, the studio began to build a pipeline and a game engine. "Arnt had already been searching for the ultimate engine for quite a while," says Patti. "We tried every engine out there and nothing met our needs because one of the big goals was to empower the creatives and offer very fast iteration." As Jensen explains: "I wanted to be able to put in the boy and immediately test it within just a few seconds."

Eventually one of the programmers they'd interviewed built an engine for them from scratch. He got the job. The core development team expanded to eight (eventually mushrooming to 20). Jensen, who had nursed *Limbo* from that original sketch of a beach and a cave, watched the game enter that strange hinterland between conception and execution, between pet project and commercial release.

Part silent movie, part retro puzzle-adventure, *Limbo*'s a curio – an arty indie game that has a fiendish sense of humour lurking beneath its beautiful visuals. "Trial and death" is how Playdead describes *Limbo*'s playstyle, and it's true that you ➋

die a lot. So much so that you begin to take a grotesque delight in watching the boy you control meet his demise over and over again, the death animations so skilfully rendered that each new tragedy becomes a perverse pleasure.

Bear traps snap him in half, drowning in water makes his body convulse as his lungs fill up, and the spider – perhaps *Limbo*'s most terrifying creation, born out of Jensen's own arachnophobia – spears him with its pointed limbs. And it's not just your death that *Limbo* confronts you with; take the lake of floating children's corpses that you must jump on like stepping stones.

It helps that the boy is so beautifully realised. Programmer Thomas Krog spent three years of development on his behaviour and procedural animation. "We wanted the boy to feel lifelike and have the physics react correctly," says Jensen. Early iterations of the boy randomly exploded, which, though funny, rather ruined the player's ability to identify with him. Without a grounding sense of humanity, *Limbo* might be too austere. The controls are simplistic. There is no dialogue, no soundtrack, and no scoring mechanism. The puzzles are stripped back so that they contain just a few elements. "I really enjoy the beauty of very simple design," says Jensen, who collaborated on the puzzles with lead gameplay designer Jeppe Carlsen. "I hate it when games make it complex to get you stuck. I think it's boring."

Employing 'tissue' testers – playtesters who were used only once – Playdead's team worked out a series of puzzles that possess the magic quality of being engaging and able to convince stuck players to blame themselves for failure. It feels like it's always you, not the design, that's at fault. "When you solve a puzzle, it's so clear and so obvious that's what you should do, because the elements are just there in your face," chuckles Jensen. "That's always the feeling we wanted."

Even the game's scene setting is cryptically minimalist. When you start *Limbo*, the boy is lying on the floor, seemingly dead, waiting for your input before he sits up and begins the adventure. How do you define a game that's so wilfully ambiguous? For Playdead, it's all about a concept that Jensen calls quiet immersion.

"I really enjoy getting rid of everything to see what works," he says. "It should be working when it's very naked and there's nothing – no music or anything. I really enjoy the moment where you can be sucked into this world with just a small sound or a hidden detail in the corner." He proudly boasts that 70 per cent of *Limbo*'s ideas were stripped out before lockdown, reducing the length of the game in one giant cull. "It's more important to have the impact and people playing it through to the end instead of just a lot of content."

Taking us from misty woods into a strange city, *Limbo* conjures up a world that is finely balanced right until its concluding puzzle, an unsolvable imponderable that makes you question what it is you have just experienced. The ending is the game's greatest mystery – a sudden cut-off that provides more questions than answers and has spawned a cottage industry of theorists mulling over the bigger themes online. Is the boy already dead? Has he fallen out of a tree house? Is his sister mourning him or joining him?

Jensen won't be drawn on any of that. For him the joy is in the ambiguity. It may be a black-and-white game, but its strength lies in its shades of grey. It's an approach that finds its greatest expression in its audio. Lacking a conventional soundtrack, *Limbo* has very little music. Instead composer **Martin Stig Andersen** created an abstract sound design.

Q&A



Martin Stig Andersen
Sound designer

How did you come to work at Playdead?
I worked for many years in art music. I used to compose pieces that were commissioned for concerts. But when I read a newspaper article about Arnt Jensen and saw the original concept trailer for *Limbo*, I wrote to him. The game reminded me of some of my stuff in creating a space where everything is not clear to the player – there's a lot of space for the player's own association and imagination.

What interests you about videogames?
Games are such a new medium. It's fresher in a way. I imagine working with sound in games right now is like working with sound in films in the '70s. Back then, they suddenly had a lot of new technology coming out and a lot of new possibilities. They didn't know how to do it and they still had to experiment and try things out.

Is *Limbo* a very cinematic game sonically?
Definitely. That was one of the challenges: to deal with preconceptions about how games should be mixed. In games, you often assign a sound to an object and then the game sort of mixes itself in an objective manner. I was more interested in a subjective mix where we hear what I imagine the boy would pay attention to. He often hears things that he is approaching on the right side of the screen, and as soon as he passes them, I just get rid of them immediately.

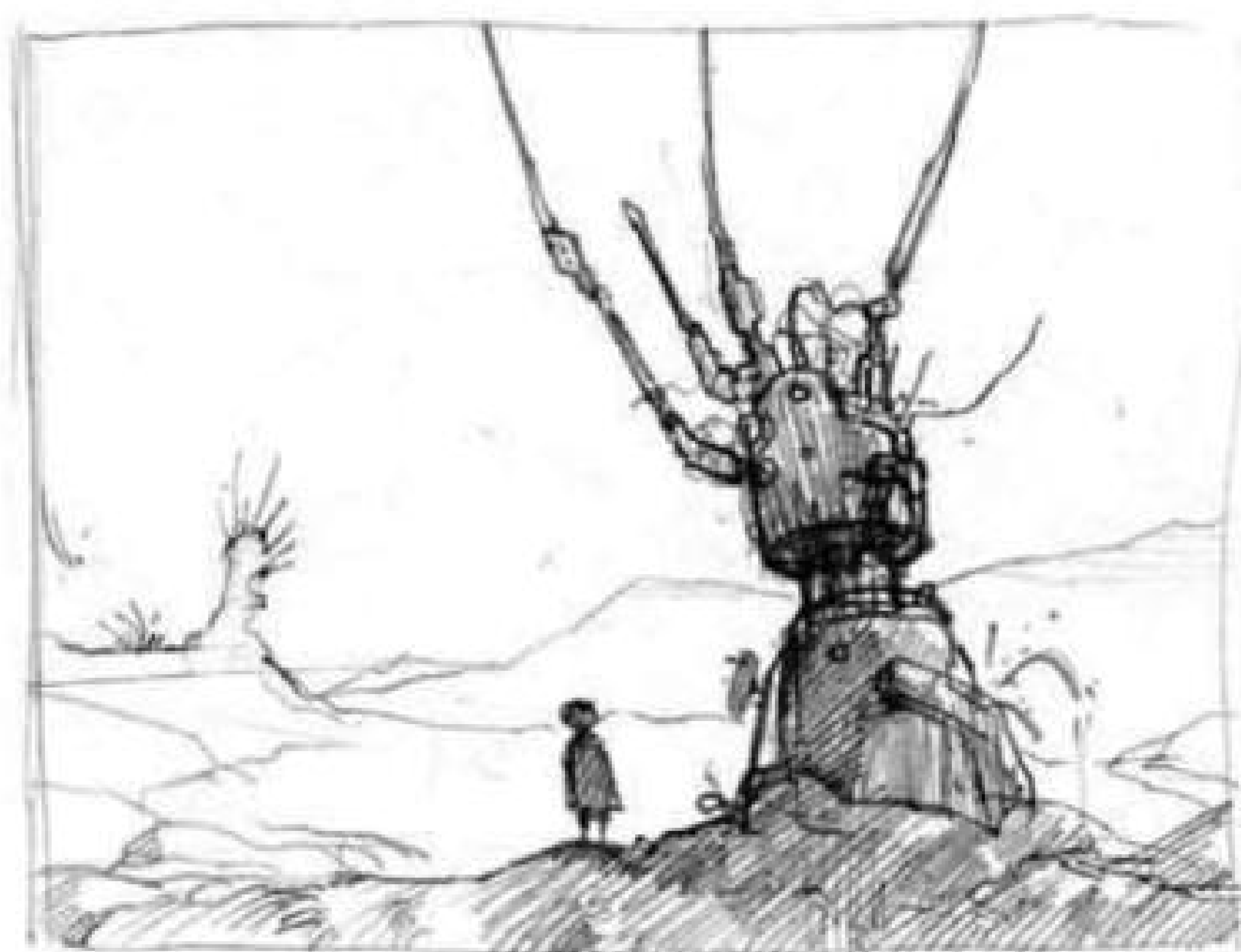
"We wanted to create this ambiguous space and not tell the player how to feel, not tell them when to be scared," says Andersen, a classically trained musician who'd never worked on a game before. "We talked about creating a silent game. We were doing a black-and-white game, so why not a silent game?" By stripping back the audio and focusing on the boy in the mix, he evoked the feel of silent cinema and contributed to the game's uniquely eerie ambience.

"We don't tell you what to feel. It evokes something in you that is your own response to the game," he continues. "If you tell the player how to feel – to be scared – it can have the opposite effect. If [they're] not taken by the hand all the time, it's much more uncertain… and truly scary."

"A masterpiece." "Close to perfect." "Genius." So read the reviews in July 2010. After so much praise, Playdead's team couldn't help but smile when the first negative review came its way. "I'd sure like to play that game," complained critic Mitch Krpata, commenting on *Limbo*'s Metacritic success in his review in the Boston Phoenix. "There must have been some kind of mix-up with what I downloaded. The *Limbo* that I played was the worst sort of art-for-art's-sake garbage. It valued form over substance, mistook vagueness for meaning and confused capriciousness with cleverness. This game is a charade."

"We all enjoyed reading it in the office," says Patti. "He hated all the things that we intended the game to be about." The real surprise, though, is that a game that's so black and white on so many levels didn't prompt more of a divided reaction. Instead, gamers seemed to get its morbid monochrome visuals and wry humour instantly. Sales to date across all platforms are around two million units, and it has picked up plenty of awards, including Best Independent Game at the 2010 Spike Video Game Awards.

What drove such a response? Perhaps more than anything it's because it is at once so familiar and yet so boldly different. Videogames are accustomed to dealing with death. How many headstones could be added to Arlington Cemetery thanks to the holocaust of *Call Of Duty: Modern Warfare*? How many planets' worth of Covenant have been splattered in *Halo*? The numbers have so many zeroes that they cease to compute. Yet, few videogames have tackled death itself – the inescapable, unbearable end that awaits us all. *Limbo* does something daring and unexpected. It's a game that reminds you that death isn't just a respawn opportunity. Sometimes it's far more tragic than that. ■

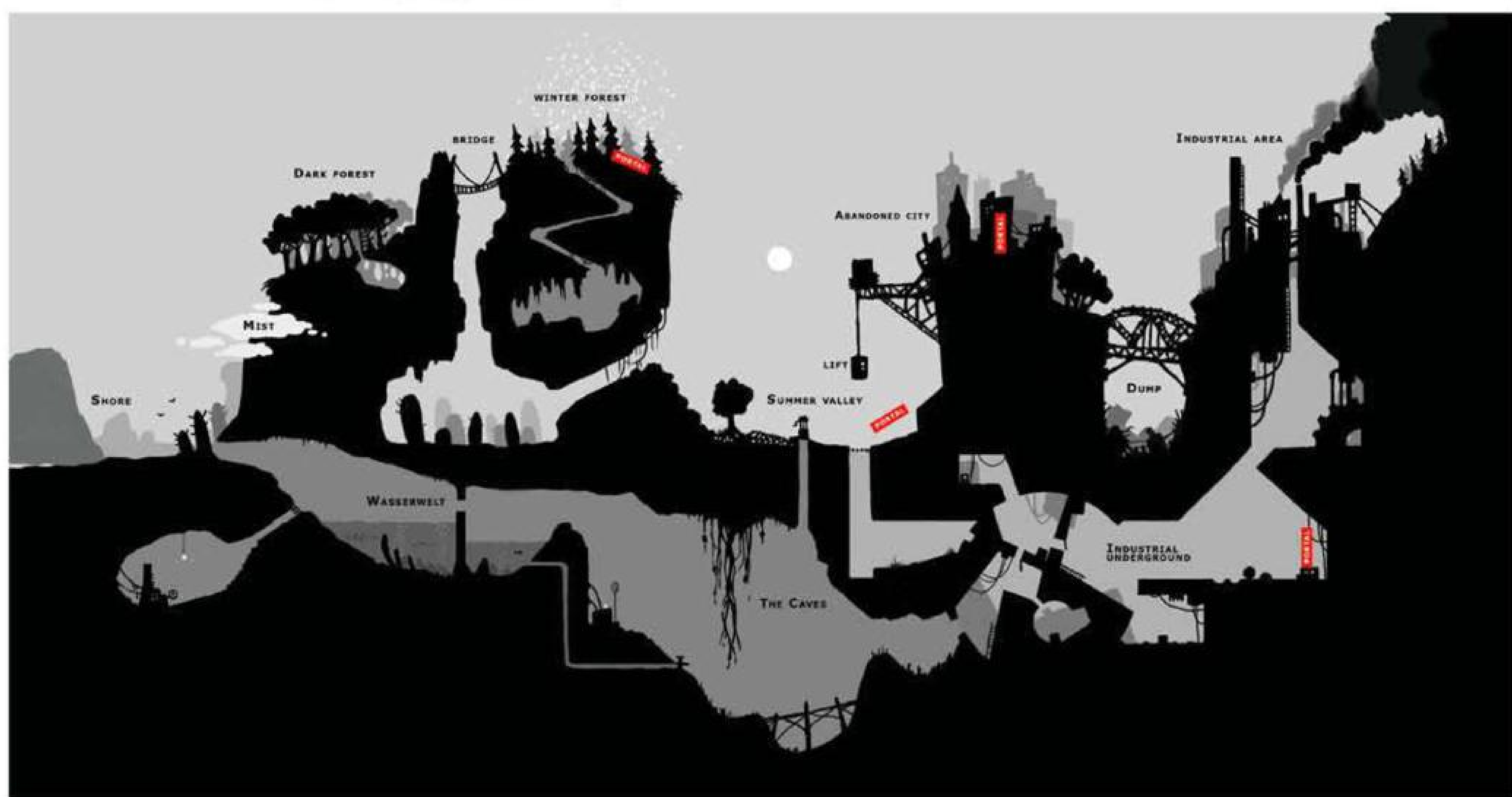






Early concept art (above) shows how little evolution there was of Jensen's original aesthetic vision for the game. This fiendishly circular map (below) was one of Jensen's first large pieces of art for the game, but was later abandoned

ABOVE **The boy was brought to life via three years of tweaking by programmer Thomas Krog**



Project Two

"We bought out our investors, so I can decide for myself," explains Jensen when asked how much he can tell us about Playdead's new, unannounced title. There is a long pause, which is fairly typical for the man. "And I've decided: I'm not going to tell you anything..." So Playdead's sophomore effort remains tightly under wraps, despite the discovery of a piece of concept art (right) online earlier this year. "It's funny," says Patti of the picture, which was submitted as part of a grant application. "It's just a bit of concept art, but it was online for half a year and no one noticed. We were like, 'OK, cool, it's passed everyone by.' Then, suddenly, a journalist found it and now everyone has seen it." The new game – currently known simply as *Project Two* – is said to be 2D but in a 3D environment. It's also very puzzle driven with simple controls, but it's apparently a lot more ambitious than *Limbo* at the same time. How's that for cryptic?



This old piece of '*Project 2*' concept art caused a stir online, amusing Playdead. The studio remains tight lipped about its content

CREATE
GALLERY

THE ART OF…

Love

The fresh thinking behind Eskil Steenberg's beautiful, ideological co-op game

This article's images appear courtesy of game art site Dead End Thrills (www.deadendthrills.com)

Eskil Steenberg, *Love*'s creator, wants his game to connect on an emotional level with players. He has been experimenting with both *Love*'s art and AI in order to achieve this 

Q&A

Eskil Steenberg
Developer, Love



Entirely the work of **Eskil Steenberg**, *Love* exhibits an uncompromising painterly art style. Its thick daubs of pixels trade clarity for effect, favouring emotional over intellectual responses. This untextured look has helped condemn the game to the outermost indie fringe, its servers visited only by a dedicated few who appreciate its beauty and the purity of its co-op.

How much of *Love*'s look did you conceive before you started making it?
I really knew what I wanted. My basic [idea] was that I wanted it to look like concept art, because I always find that concept art looks better than the final thing. Especially when it's sort of simple – doodles almost, but with very strong colours in it. Then I had these limitations: that it's a procedural world that has to be generated, I can't pre-bake it, I can't art direct it, and I can't texture it, because I just didn't have the tools at the time to texture something that big. And I didn't want it to look like pure graphics; I wanted it to look organic. *Unreal* and other games at the time were very bump-mappy, and that meant that you had very sharp edges and detailed surfaces, and very clear sky. The air is very clear. So I thought, 'OK, I'm going to make everything super-curvy and soft, and have very big flat surfaces of single colours, and then use lights and effects.'

I had a problem early in development, which was that there were these teeny tiny glitches between certain polys, and it would mean that you could see the sky through a rock, for instance. And when you were on the shadow side, it would become very pronounced – these white dots. And this is a problem that has to do with the precision of CPUs, so it couldn't really be fixed without adding a more complicated system. So then I thought, 'What if I just look up all the pixels around the pixel? If I'm [a pixel and] really bright and everything around me is dark, I'll just pick the dark one next to

Love's painterly aesthetic was born from the mix of a desire to emulate the bold colours and softness of concept art and as a fix for a technical glitch. The result is the '*Love* effect' that's showcased here





me.' And I wrote that as a post effect and it created this blobby effect that's the *Love* effect. That was my eureka moment…

The downside is that *Love* isn't as readable as your average game. Were you conscious of that from the outset?
This is the million-dollar question. Because, yes, it is very conscious, but it's more… I can't do anything a certain way if I find a better way to do it. I made the game in order to invent new stuff. And when people talk about ease of use or logic, they really just mean does it look like everything else. Because people don't want to learn anything. All my veteran players think *Love* is the most logical game ever – it's just a slightly different logic to other games.

How about the tribespeople?
I wanted them to be ill-defined but still defined, and for the races to be distinct. I wrote my own animation system, and I had this vision that you should not communicate directly and intellectually, you should communicate emotionally. All the characters in *Love* will usually drop something if you shoot them, and they're not usually that hard to kill. So there's every incentive to kill them, basically, and no penalty beyond them going aggro on you. I added a single animation, which was just them doing this [waves his hand] when they see you for the first time, and instantly all my players stopped killing the [NPCs]. They started treating them as human beings. Then I added some more things, so now when you walk up to them they'll look at you; if you have your gun out, then they'll pull out their guns… they're following and repeating. And I'd like to have nonsense voices added – that's something I'm going to work on… Just tone of voice, you know? ■



What Games Are



TADHG KELLY

We need to change the message: gaming can be good for you

Every time there is a mass shooting, such as the recent one in Colorado, some hack labels *Call Of Duty* a training sim for psychos and says that this is what games are. Similarly, documentaries from the likes of the BBC (such as Panorama's Addicted To Games) paint gaming as a negative waste of time. Games are even accused of being subversive, corrupting or part of a conspiracy (see: Fox News).

Mainstreamers (or 'muggles', as I like to call them) view games as diversions for those unable to "get a life", and strictly for nerds. In the '80s, when games were still very new, this was understandable – but the same attitude still pervades. Games have never been more popular, but the bulk of muggles do not think of themselves as "gamers". Your mother plays *FarmVille* on Facebook, but seems to disassociate that activity with whatever it is that 'gamers' do.

To muggle eyes, 'gamers' are either Anders Breivik, or rotund slackers doomed to diabetes and colon cancer from an overdose of pizza and physical inactivity. The same tired jokes about being unable to get girlfriends do the rounds. So against this backdrop the idea that games are good for you sounds pretty ridiculous. Yet it is true.

Games are incredibly good for you. Games help to cathartically defuse aggression. Games expand intelligence, both mechanically and imaginatively. Games improve literacy and numeracy. Games can educate in a way that doesn't feel like education, so while you thought you were having fun you were actually learning something. Games can influence your mood, make you feel relieved, scared or full of mirth.

Politicos might point to violent games and make dubious claims that because we let kids play with virtual guns they're being trained to commit atrocities, but the figures do not back this up. Every serious study concludes that there is no link between game violence and real violence. As it happens, violent crime rates in the western world have dropped as videogame sales have risen. Perhaps people are less likely to do nasty things in real life if they can blow off steam in a game. So maybe games actually save lives.

Jane McGonigal takes this thinking several steps further, asserting that games can save your life. At a recent TED talk in Edinburgh, she talked about how the physical, emotional, mental and social aspects of games can strengthen mind, body and soul. She even claims that by regularly playing the right games you could extend your lifespan by up to a decade, and has developed an RPG (*SuperBetter*) that aims to help do just that.



> Your mother plays FarmVille on Facebook, but seems to dissociate that activity from whatever it is that 'gamers' do

While it may sound far-fetched, I see no reason to not feel optimistic about this kind of ambition. Gaming geeks are among the least violent, most considerate adults that I know. They think more, care more, solve more problems and behave in a genuinely more conscientious fashion than most. So those games must be doing something right. I think it has something to do with making a difference.

To one per cent of one per cent of us, life is a smart game. My friend who trades in the City of London and makes hilarious amounts of money doing it is one example. So is my friend who understood the property market's strengths and woes long before anyone else and has made a small fortune with some judicious bets.

However for most of us life is barely managed chaos. It usually involves the nameless dread of forces we cannot fully comprehend, and we bounce from one event to another in the hope it will all work out. We feel that the goalposts are always moving, and worry about losing whatever little piece of the pie that we managed to grab and call our own. Job security, debts, pensions, kids and so on scare us and lead to anxiety, depression, rage and even suicide. Or, if you're so inclined, killing sprees. Faced with the awesome and opaque bureaucracy of life, how powerless do most of us feel most of the time?

This is why games are good for you: you play to win, build, achieve, overcome or create. You play to experience that sensation, and that makes you feel better as a person. Although your life may be a shambles of credit-card bills and threats to your livelihood, in a game you are an agent of change and you make a difference.

Making a difference explains why sports matter: the athlete makes a difference on the audience's behalf. So much so that we'll collectively spend billions on the Olympics in the hope of feeling good. As a society we ascribe meaning to the meaningless kicking of a ball or jumping over a hurdle because they feel like differences in ways that (for instance) the discovery of the Higgs boson does not. Most people can get behind the Olympic torch relay far more than a particle accelerator, because it feels more tangible.

That sense of making a difference, and all the positive qualities that it brings with it, is how we should respond to the bias against games. Game violence is good for you. Game learning is good for you. Game creativity is good for you, too. Games help you make a difference.

Let's make that the message.

Tadhg Kelly has worked in games, from tabletop to consoles, for nearly 20 years. Visit him at www.whatgamesare.com

In The Click Of It



CLINT HOCKING

Why Minecraft is the most important game of the decade

For some time, I've wanted to write down my thoughts and reactions to *Minecraft*, but for the most part I felt it wasn't necessary. I felt people already understood why *Minecraft* was such a wonderful and important game, and that the reasons why I think it is great were fairly common. Recently, however, while having dinner with some friends, I was surprised when one of them expressed appreciation for *Minecraft*, but then followed it by saying that he didn't really understand what it was that made it so enthralling.

I also love *Minecraft*. I think that it is a gaming masterpiece. It is a landmark videogame that has transformed the way we think about games, and I suspect that over time it will prove itself to be at least as important to the history of game development as *GTAIII*. Of course, everyone can have their own reasons for why they love *Minecraft*, and my reasons are my own, but I would like to share them with you, because perhaps they are not so obvious after all.

To start with, there are many obvious reasons why *Minecraft* is awesome. It is awesome because it runs in a browser and thus virtually anyone can play it. It is awesome because the free-to-play Creative Mode is at once an extremely welcoming 'toy' and an open invitation for you to imagine what a game built atop that toy could be like. It is awesome because the cost to transform the toy into the game is just right.

It is awesome because the core loop of engaging with the game challenges in exchange for a steady income of rewards empowers and unlocks more than just an incrementally more difficult set of challenges – it unlocks our creativity and imagination. It is awesome because it is a game set in a fantasy world that is fresh and new, and does not rely on the tired tropes of elves and orcs, wizards and trolls and an ancient, forgotten evil that must be confronted by the Chosen One – with a princess as the prize.

Minecraft is awesome because of its infinite scale, and the simplicity of its core. So many modern fantasy blockbusters spend millions of dollars on cutscenes and convoluted, character-generating training levels in fully realised 3D environments with a story that sets you up as a lowly miner or a simple farmer who has heard the call to adventure. *Minecraft* hands you a pick and a hoe and tells you quite plainly on that first night, "adventure is everywhere".



In Minecraft, there is not one byte devoted to verisimilitude that is not directly supporting interactivity

But underlying these obvious things that make *Minecraft* awesome, what are the deeper reasons? Why is it important? What are the lessons we need to learn from *Minecraft* in order to make better games? I think the most important thing we need to learn from *Minecraft* has to do with something I call the Hecker Conundrum.

Named for *Spy Party* creator Chris Hecker, who first articulated it formally, the Hecker Conundrum posits that the lowest resistance path to demonstrating that a given game has best optimised the most recent advances in computing technology lies in maximising the verisimilitude of the game – even if we do so at the expense of interactivity. What makes it a conundrum is that this path is not only lowest resistance for the individual developer who wants to do a good job, but also for the individual producer who needs to get the game green-lit by his publisher, and for the executive who needs to close his deal with the vendor, and for the vendor who needs to move the units off his shelves one at a time to millions of players. It's a conundrum because even those who understand that they are trading away the beating heart of what makes a game have no obvious way to opt out of it.

Unless you happen to be named Notch, apparently. If *Minecraft* has established itself as the most important game of the decade, it is not because of its emphasis on player creativity, or because of its fresh take on the fantasy genre. It's not because of its honest call to adventure, or because of its engaging toy. It's because *Minecraft* provides proof that there are some available solutions to the Hecker Conundrum.

In my opinion, *Minecraft*'s resounding success lies in the fact that somehow, unbelievably, in the graph of interactivity against verisimilitude there is a perfectly stable point – a sort of new [0,0] – where they are not only balanced, but where the game is massively successful. In *Minecraft*, there is not one byte devoted to verisimilitude that is not directly supporting interactivity. Nothing is represented in the world that does not have mechanical meaning. Every block has meaningful properties, every pixel communicates information, and every player action over every clock-tick interacts with those properties and updates the information communicating the world state.

Perhaps you think that, while interesting, this observation is a bit academic as far as the tastes of the average gamer are concerned. Maybe that's true. At the same time, if you consider all of the reasons players do say they love *Minecraft*, and consider the underlying principles that made those features possible in the first place, you'll find that this perfect parity between verisimilitude and interactivity lies at the very core of what *Minecraft* is, and why it is such an important work.

Clint Hocking is in the process of relocating to America to work for Valve. He blogs at www.clicknothing.com

The Possibility Space



RANDY SMITH

The Waking Mars postmortem, part 2

As a natural storyteller, I enjoyed designing characters and crafting dialogue for *Waking Mars*, but I was aware it could be a horrible mistake simply because static text rarely improves the interactive medium. Our fiction turned out to be highly polarising, receiving praise from some and scorn from others, but not always for the reasons I expected.

My strongest motivation behind *Waking Mars*' storytelling was to move beyond the 'archeology gameplay' of *Spider*, *BioShock* and countless other games in which the real story occurs in the past and is revealed through environmental props. The *Waking Mars* experiment was to add characters whose story is about unearthing and interpreting this archeological record, in part to help the player understand and relate to it. Beyond that, it's not clear this two-level approach accomplishes much, perhaps because it could have been executed better. A more artistic achievement might make use of this dichotomy by inviting the player to connect with the characters but balance their interpretation of the backstory against the player's own. I only just thought of that, though, which is the nature of experiments.

Meanwhile, the ambition for our two human characters was that they be plausible real people whose qualities and reactions would be genuine and believable – never clichéd nor contrived for some structural purpose. This reserved approach contributed to the game feeling 'adult' and led to some unusual fiction. However, Amani has proved a particularly divisive figure. Interestingly, women tend to believe she's an airhead, while men say she's too bossy and sassy. My intention was that she be chipper, supportive and the smartest character in the game. Overall, some felt the characters were corny and wooden, while others praised their realism. I'm not sure what to make of this mixed reception. Maybe our approach flew in the face of expectations. Maybe it's normal; my friends and I often disagree about characters in books and movies. Or maybe the characters and dialogue should have been improved.

Players have also complained that we used character portraits lifted from the Internet, although we actually cast, directed and shot the actors ourselves. This, the most universally criticised



It's no Sistine Chapel, but I believe and am proud that Waking Mars holds up as a game with lasting artistic value

aspect of *Waking Mars*, was entirely my fault. I felt photography would better convey the subtlety of human acting, but in retrospect it should have been treated to match the game's art.

In terms of *Waking Mars*' humour, I had originally envisioned the game as epic, sombre, and cold, but I worried this might further alienate players turned off by sci-fi. When my co-developer Theron Jacobs and I analysed *Sword & Sworcery* for 'hipness' (www.bit.ly/OOAbOT), we realised that not taking ourselves so seriously might help the game be warm and fun, but at the risk of meaningful subjects feeling disposable. Humour was an interesting ingredient in the mix, but *Fez* and *Sword & Sworcery* are games that use levity without eroding their sense of importance.

This leads us to our interactive dialogue. *Waking Mars* doesn't have conversation menus, but the dialogue varies whenever there's a reason for it to, most commonly depending on what the player previously encountered or accomplished. The irony is that when this works, you don't notice. Far from a flashy selling point, this was just the price we paid for chatty characters who we aspired to remain perfectly credible in an open world with uncertain quest states. I'm glad we followed through on this, because the extra work results in a 'cosier fit' where common but goofy storytelling artefacts aren't present, and because of some interesting discoveries about interactive narrative that I'm excited to experiment with more.

In addition to entertainment, *Waking Mars* set out to be 'about' something, to stick with you after the game was over, to be worthy of interpretation. Because the meaning of games always comes from interactions, the playable systems of *Waking Mars* are designed to depict and encourage thoughtfulness about those things that fascinate us about ecosystems: the emergent states of equilibrium, the vectors of propagation, their occasional grotesqueness, the individuals that make up the whole. It is intended as a coherent work where every other channel – the dialogue, environments, multiple endings, backstory and so forth – contextualise this theme of 'ecosystems', offering perspectives and posing questions. How do we feel about ecosystems in our own lives? Is it natural for them to perish? Do we owe them anything? It's no Sistine Chapel, but I believe and am proud that *Waking Mars* holds up as a game with lasting artistic value.

Yet despite all the craft and care we put into our fiction, a significant percentage of players approach it just like any cutscene: they click, click, click to skip through it. I completely sympathise. The text might reflect their gaming experience, but still interrupts it to shove them into a static medium. If you like story, you might find *Waking Mars* has a quality offering, but if you don't, it won't change your mind with any revolutionary solution to the 'play vs story' problem. Here, at least, story is still just story.

Randy Smith is the co-owner of Tiger Style, whose second game, Waking Mars, *is available in the App Store now*



Word Play



JAMES LEACH

Returning to former conquests

Why do you go back to play games you've already beaten? I've been doing this for a while, and it's been bringing me great joy, but it's not simply, as I first thought, nostalgia. I suggest that it's lots of things, all tied up with pleasure, the frustration and the emotion of gaming. And I've decided to list them, so you don't have to.

As we know, the more you play a game, the better you get, so revisiting one is a little like playing it the first time, but with an already-formed uncanny ability to be good at it. Early parts of games are, of course, easier, so while you play through these, your skills will be far in advance of those supposed by the developers, and you'll be a gaming god.

Revisiting a game you've won means you don't have to learn anything at all. No tutorials, no plot to pay attention to, no explanation of the weaponry. It's pure pick up and play gaming. The game does enable you to do that, right? You're not revisiting a game that forces you to go through some bootcamp-like tooltip-strewn hell of an indoctrination are you? No? Glad to hear it.

The best games provide satisfying fun no matter how proficient and confident you are with them. If it were only about novelty, all the industry would need to do is keep making a stream of new games, not necessarily good ones. And nobody does that. Oh. Hang on.

There's the desire to do better – to push further, to get a higher score than before. To amass more. It's the competitive element that we all possess, and returning to a game is a little like playing against the person you were when you first immersed yourself in it. And I don't know about you, but every younger me so far has deserved a violent spanking at the hands of older me.

Finally, there's the great pleasure of familiarity. Of knowing a game so well that it's a nice, cosy place to be (despite, probably, being peopled with scary creatures or robots hell-bent on killing you in a variety of nasty ways).

If you've played the game a lot, then you've earned the right to know it as well as you do, and you're almost certainly good at it, so it's yours. It's your domain, and as long as there's cool stuff to do, you're happy there. This is especially true of



The memes, the acronyms, the instant recognition of shared elements are all things that make us feel we belong

online games. No matter how well written the dialogue of a game is, how richly characterful the NPCs are, how smart the AI and varied the banter can be, there's nothing quite like having other real humans to play with and against in a world that you know well.

Of course the more you play a game, the better you get at it, and there's usually a visual clue to this. You'll have your rank or power on display, or you'll have weapons or vehicles that others can only dream of. This puts you in a position not often found in real life. You're clearly a badass. Someone not to be messed with. You don't have to spoil this by telling people – they can see it. Everyone wants you on their team and others log off if they have to play against you. It's a surprisingly deep and complex set of emotions, the main one being enjoyment at being the most dangerous and cool dude in the saloon.

Here's a shameful admission: I have found myself returning to games to indulge myself, like the old cop coming out of retirement one last time because he's the best and everyone knows it.

This isn't just about showing off and making enemies. People talk about the online community, and rightly so – unless they do it in an annoying way. It is a community. The memes, the acronyms, the instant recognition of shared elements are all things that make us feel we belong, and form part of the appeal. It's true of the online games as well, even ones that pit us against our fellow man with an intensely gladiatorial ferocity.

I'm playing a lot of *Rise Of Glory* in my downtime at the moment. It's a WWI aerial dogfighting game for smartphones, and what I love about it is that as well as the savage bullet-spitting destruction pilots mete out on each other, there's the ability to send brief, self-penned messages. Overwhelmingly funny and polite, many are greetings from players to each other. "Nice to see you! Respect!" they warble as they smash a stream of red-hot bullets into your skull.

As an experiment, I personalised a few of these comments, greeting the odd opponent directly by name. When, inevitably, my path crossed with theirs, I'd loose off the lines I'd prepared. Nearly all of them bothered to go away and write tailored messages in return. And all this has to be done between rounds of combat, so it takes a degree of effort and planning.

So I come back to lots of games simply because I know them, but in addition I return to online games because of the people that I feel I know. Not to pop in and say hi seems a bit, well, rude. Although, in retrospect, my *Rise Of Glory* personal message experiment might not be shedding as much light on the goodness of humanity as I initially thought. The thing is, I called myself Katy Perry and told my subjects – sincerely, and using their names – that I loved them. It might be worth pointing out that, although I do sort of love them a bit, I am not Katy Perry.

James Leach is a BAFTA Award-winning freelance writer who works on games, and for ad agencies, TV, radio and online


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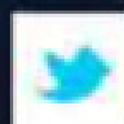
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